Matthew Sanford Transforms Loss
by Nathan Scolaro

Matthew Sanford says deepening the connection between mind and body is more than a personal health strategy; it is a practical shift in consciousness that can transform the world. Everything he does flows from his daily yoga practice—an opportunity, as he sees it, to bring awareness to his inner world and feel into the sensations within. It’s inevitable, Matthew says, that from this consciousness, a more compassionate path follows, because we become more attentive to the connections that sustain us.

Matthew has been paralysed from the chest down since 1978 when he was in a devastating car accident at just 13 years old. For a long time, he was taught by his caregivers to concentrate on his upper body and strengthen it through exercises. But he felt it was his birthright to connect with his whole body—to be more than a “floating upper torso”—and deep down he believed it was possible. When he was 25, he was introduced to yoga, and had an incredible teacher who helped him to spread his legs wide for the first time in 12 years. “It was really powerful,” Matthew says. “I had tears. I could feel the energy flow through my whole body.” Matthew felt what he had long believed: that his paralysed body pulsed with sensation and had as much to teach him about being alive as any of his abled body parts.

A certified iyengar yoga teacher, Matthew now shares his practices and insights with students of all abilities. As he says, “The principles of yoga apply to all people, all bodies.” In 2002, he founded Mind Body Solutions, a nonprofit organisation dedicated to transforming trauma, loss and disability into hope and potential by awakening the connection between the mind and body. Through experiential activities, group discussions and creative problem solving, he works with caregivers and educators to broaden their understanding of trauma and how it lands in us—in particular, how it lands in the silent and intangible aspects of the mind-body relationship.

In a culture where only the seen, measurable and tangible parts of the human experience have validity, Matthew reminds us that we are much more than we know ourselves to be, and that strength and grace can come even in the face of illness, aging and death. Perhaps our potential to heal, and to be whole, lies not just in the physical matter of our bodies, but in that elusive space between as well.

MATTHEW SANFORD: So you’re in Australia?

NATHAN SCOLARO: That’s right.

I’m glad that Australia became sane again.

Yeah, yeah, a moment of respite for us.
I was trying to explain to my son that collective insanity happens all the time. Like building a whole bunch of nuclear weapons in order to feel safer is our leadership literally collectively becoming insane. Gay marriage is a symptom of what exactly? People can be whatever they are and it’s okay. That’s sanity. But we’ve been told certain stories that have made us insane. We are somehow not recognising that we’re part of the earth. Like, that’s insane. We depend on what’s outside of us. You destroy the outside, you destroy you. Right? We’re working through that insanity now. It will take time and the clock is ticking.

I hope we get there. To the realisation, collectively.

That’s the hope. I keep telling myself there are at least a million people having the ideas I’m having.

More and more, more and more. So I’m really excited to meet you. I heard your conversation with Krista Tippett and was blown away.

Thank you. I’m still processing a lot from that interview.

Well feel free to process in our time together. Should we start with the work you’re doing now? Maybe just tell us a bit about your non-profit, Mind Body Solutions.

So Mind Body Solutions exists to help people transform trauma, loss and disability by connecting mind and body. And we do it for both people living with the trauma of disability and for their caregivers. So that’s my main platform. However I’m a yoga teacher. And I get around in a wheelchair. I’m 52 now, but I was in a car accident when I was 13. My father and sister were killed in the accident. My mother and brother were fine. Well, no physical injuries, they weren’t fine. But I broke my neck and my back and both my wrists and collapsed a lung and sustained and injured my pancreas that left me unable to eat for nearly 60 days. So I went from being a very athletic 13-year-old boy, 119 pounds down to 79 pounds. I was in a coma. And I woke up to a completely different life. I’d gone to sleep in the back of our family car nestled up to my sister. So I had a big life change. I went through the first 12 years of recovery where I was basically taught that I could have no relationship to the lower two-thirds of my body really. That I could only feel above my level of injury, which is right at my breastbone. And I was taught to make my arms really strong and learn to overcome my body. And drag my paralysed body through life. But after a while, I really missed my body. Then I started yoga at 25. I started practicing yoga with a spinal cord injury. And I happened to find a fantastic teacher, Jo Zukovich, and we explored what it was like to move awareness through my whole body without being able to muscularly flex muscles. So I really explored the mind-body relationship in a very subtle and profound way. And realised that although I would never walk again, there’s a lot of awareness that’s still possible through my whole body, through the methodology of yoga. And one of the big things for me was to recognise that my paralysed body didn’t stop talking to my mind. It only changed its voice: it was quieter and subtler; it didn’t react as quickly, maybe wasn’t as clear, but it was still speaking. This revolutionised for me what my experience was of living with a disability. It began the journey of me listening on a much deeper level. I started asking big questions. What it is like to be a whole human being? What is it to have a body? A lot of people think that I became a yoga teacher because I overcame my disability. No. I’m a yoga teacher exactly because I’m disabled, exactly because I live an altered mind-body relationship. And what I’ve learned over time is that through your whole body there’s awareness that doesn’t have to travel through the spinal cord directly. Our consciousness is more subtle than that. Our nervous system has all different ways to interact with the body.
So tell me what that is like for you, in your body, feeling that interaction of the nervous system and subtlety in your body.

What I found, as I started to recognise and feel some of the more subtle connections to my whole body, is that who and what you are—especially what you are—changes shape. You actually start to recognise things you never knew before. And so what I like to say is we’re all made up of some combination of tangible and intangible. In broad human history we’ve called our intangible nature by a whole bunch of names. You might have called it “soul,” you might call it “spirit,” you might call it “psyche,” you might call it “the unconscious,” you might call it all these different things. But the truth is that we have some combination of both in what we are. So everyone lives the same basic story within their own mind-body relationship. When you recognise that part of you is intangible, your conception of yoga changes.

One way that I describe yoga is that you’re trying to integrate or yoke together what you can feel and control with what you can’t feel and can’t control.

Yoga poses yoke together the intangible with the tangible and brings them both into action. And when this happens you include the subtlety of what you are—and I don’t just mean by intention in your head. I mean literally by presence through your whole body. Our bodies make the intangible tangible. It just requires that your mind quiets down. When this happens, the shape of our consciousness changes. For example, I’ve never seen someone become more aware of his or her body without also becoming more compassionate.

Mm. So with awareness comes the compassion?

Yeah. And I think that your body, when you start to explore it, you feel more connected to everything. This leads to compassion. It’s ironic that this is coming from me right? I’m a guy that’s talking about exploring the body and I can’t feel it the same as you. But as I describe it in my book, Waking, what I experience through paralysis is that my outer body, my ability to be able to control muscles and move, is gone right? With my legs and below my chest—I don’t have that same direct access. Instead I hear what is there underneath my ability to move. In my first book I describe that my body presents itself to me like an artichoke as we eat it. Green leaf after green leaf, thriving muscle after thriving muscle, is peeled away. Until nothing but the heart of the artichoke remains—a heart that presents as space and silence. Now I think that because of my spinal cord injury I have a more direct and unfettered access to the manifestation of existence as it houses in our body. ‘Cause I feel what it is like to live in a body, in certain parts of my body anyway, without any control. But instead of helping me realise the sensation of existence without control, the doctors told me I had no sensation in my body below my point of injury. That was patently false. It turns out when you peel away artichoke leaves what remains is a hum in the core of what we are. I can feel into my legs, it’s just different to what you feel. And it turns out that you can teach this subtler level of sensation to people living with disability, regardless of their specific conditions. You can show them that there’s another level of their sensation and existence that precedes their ability to control it. It’s more than a wish or the imagination. It’s an experienced truth. This part of the mind-body relationship is not rehabilitated in the Western paradigm. And so I go around teaching healthcare professionals how to include and engage this level of human being in the healing process. So what I feel in my legs you can also feel in the core of you. I just have it easier because my paralysis removes the distraction of the outer body. When you connect to your own existence at this deeper level, like I said, compassion is
So by ceasing control we can better hear this part of ourselves? This hum. Is that how you describe it?

What I think I hear within my paralysis is what consciousness feels like as a sensation. It’s beautiful and quiet and powerful and it resists my will. That’s what’s so beautiful, it’s “here” whether we feel it or not. And yet the yogic tradition is passing down that if the universe manifested as a sound it would sound like “Om.” On some level, I think that this is the sound I hear within my paralysis. “Om.” And what’s crazy is when I come into better alignment, the hum, the Om, becomes louder. So I study a type of yoga called Iyengar Yoga, which works to actually bring things more into alignment. When you come into greater alignment, that hum gets louder and it creates a sense of wholeness. And when this happens, an effortless form of mind-body integration occurs. This hum can improve your breathing. The gift of being alive is that we have the opportunity to do things like breathing and asana, which are our yoga postures, that can more directly participate in this hum. For me, I have come to these insights because my paralysis brings me the experience of consciousness before control. In other words, paralysis is my teacher, not simply an impediment. It turns out when you act in congruence with this deeper hum, you can transfer better, your balance increases, you feel more whole. You become more connected to the space around you. This is a game-changer for someone living with a disability. But quite honestly, it’s a game-changer for everyone.

And is that because we’re more tuned into subtleties and we’re unconsciously self-correcting? You know, we’re more aware of our bodies, more in relationship with them, so we’re sort of correcting our physical form according to the environment?

Well, there’s another line I like to say when I teach: “Strength without a sense of direction leads to violence.” That’s what I would say my physical therapy did. The recovery process was getting me really strong, to act upon my body but without teaching me an inward sense of direction. The result was a subtly violent relationship to my paralysed body. I was having to lunge with my body, right? With an outward sense of direction. If you felt a direction at a deep level, inward, that is grace. But they were thinking I could only move from my chest up. They were saying, “Get really strong and lunge.” But they didn’t teach me how to lift my tailbone up through my mouth while simultaneously pushing down through my heels. That inward sensation I can do now. And when I do, when I lift up and start this hunkering down, when I move more gracefully like that, I don’t have to use as much effort and violence. I can transfer better. I can move better. I’ve been teaching people with disability for years, and I’ve trained teachers coming from around the world. What I try to do is reveal in very practical ways the fact that we all have a more subtle body that actually changes and can change and transform how we move. And then you open to your intangible nature more. Without it being infected by a belief system [laughs]. ’Cause we have an intangible nature. And human history’s been competing for it. With belief systems.

You’re trying to talk about something that is the experience, not the belief system.

Absolutely.

Although yoga you could argue is a belief system.

Watching this level of sensation in your body is independent of belief. It is an experience.
I’m actually experiencing it. If I put my hand on your back between your shoulder blades and lightly push forward and up with my open palm, you would feel a lightness come into your chest. Your balance on your feet would change. Something would distribute through your whole body. Something might even begin to heal. What you do with that expansion of sensation is up to you. You are free to work with it in service of any belief system you choose. But I do think that this lightening sensation comes from the sensation of unity between all things. This is what I chose to believe. The sensation itself is an experienced fact.

Matthew Sanford and Mind Body Solutions yoga class photo shoot, Minnetonka, Minnesota, May 28, 2015.

So I want to explore a little more about this, how this mind-body connection then allows us to be more compassionate not only with ourselves but with people around us. How do you understand that? How it helps us to feel into our interdependence, our connection to one another?

My sense is that the mind is the organ of disconnection. Your mind is a mind exactly because it’s separate from objects and, you know, is disconnected. In contrast, the spine is the organ of connection. Your life force comes through your spine and then it gets organised by your brain. Remember if you believe in evolution, which I do, our spine came first and our brain formed on top of our spine. Your body is actually more connected to the present than your mind. And so when you start being more aware—even just becoming more sensual and being able to feel your own body more and touching things—you become more connected and unified with everything around you. When this happens, compassion is the natural result.

Now we translate this very practically in my work at Mind Body Solutions. We train healthcare professionals all the time who are struggling with compassion fatigue. And what we try to show them—not teach them—what we try to show them is that the subtle, quiet part of their mind-body relationship—the part that receives support, the part that can take in nourishment, that subtler, quieter part of the mind-body relationship—is the source of compassion. But healthcare workers are often pathological givers. They mostly give themselves away too quickly in the giving. They’re not claiming the space within their own body, the subtle space, as they give. They’re too willing to give it away and be of service. So it’s not just that healthcare workers have to learn how to self-care, ‘cause a pathological giver is not going to want to be told to self-care, right? But what I want them to realise is that the quiet part—the part that makes me able to feel into my paralysis—is the source of their greatest resilience.

It’s the source of their engagement. If they learn how to have it in their own mind-body relationship, they begin to realise that it is not incongruent with the busyness of their day. You can claim the deepest parts of you and still move in a busy workplace. Paradoxically, it turns out that the emptiness in us, in you, is your best boundary against the tumult of your day. It is also the key to your resilience. It’s a crazy thing—the empty, intangible part of you is your best boundary. Caregivers are giving this part away too fast. So they’re losing compassion because the connective part of them, the intangible part is not being recognised as the unified part with existence. And so the result is added suffering. All of this ties in back to the body. When I flex too hard with my arm muscles, when I strongly engage my will, I separate not only from the core of my existence, but also from the space directly around my body. With practice, I can open and
learn to flex my muscles with more precision and alignment and not cause a
disconnection from the space around me. When this happens, your intangible part starts
to connect more with everything. So right now I’m going to ask you Nathan to sit in your
chair, sit up straight, and become aware of the space right behind your sternum. Right
behind your back. And just try to go inward to feel that. Soften the inside of your mouth.
And just open to that. Now be more connected to the room, the whole room you’re in. And
make sure you breathe into that level of connection. When you experience connection
with the space around you, when you feel spaciousness inside of the centre of your chest
and let that connect to the space literally around your body, you start to integrate with
the space around you. That’s the insight.

When you were asking me to pay attention to the sternum what I realised is there’s a
softening that happens. We see where we hold and where trauma kind of stores in the
body and the habits that we create to protect our self. So that awareness is actually
cutting through and opening us up.

That’s exactly right. And when there’s a sense of relief, then I think it leads to
compassion. I also think self is realised through experience. You can’t learn it. It’s a
recognition and an allowing—as opposed to something that you achieve. When I’m talking
in the beginning of a yoga class I’ll say, “Presence is something you allow.” People think
presence is something you intend with your brain, which is so ironic right? Because their
mind’s the organ of disconnection. So they’re going to all of a sudden take what’s
disconnected and go, “Okay I’m going to be more present.”

I’ve done that! And not understood why I can’t be in the moment.

You have to allow your presence. And Patanjali, the guy that wrote the Yoga Sutras way
back when, writes about ceasing the oscillations of the mind—all the activity of the mind
so you can experience the connected parts of our existence. When you do, when you start
to realise the connective aspects of our existence, that’s when you start to be more
compassionate. I read somewhere that the ancients said that the natural consequence of
alignment is compassion.

Yeah beautiful.

So for example if we could learn to align with a sense of spaciousness in the centre of
your chest—the sensation of spaciousness in the centre of your being—and act in an
aligned fashion from that spaciousness, natural consequence of that is compassion. That
is a reason for hope. I’m trying to teach such insights to healthcare professionals and
anyone who will listen. The sensation of compassion does not have to be dependent on a
particular belief. It can be the consequence of learning how to align with a sensation in
the centre of your chest.

Mm. I’d love to ground some of this in some examples. So perhaps talking about some of
the breakthroughs that you’ve seen in your practitioners.

An example might be a student of mine who lives with a disability. He’s a quadriplegic. He
can move his arms but they are weakened and he doesn’t have control of his fingers. He’s
lost a lot of strength in his upper body and after four and a half years of rehab he still
could not transfer from his wheelchair to the couch. He came to my yoga class to feel
better. I figured out that he couldn’t transfer because nobody had taught him to press
down through his feet and lift up through his sternum. The medical model could never
Teach him this because it doesn’t believe it is possible. I was able to show him that, even
though he couldn’t muscularly act, he could push down to his feet. This “action” was more than visualisation, more than simply imagining it. In fact, it was an inward action that could give his physical effort a deepened sense of direction. He now can transfer on his own. The rehab professionals had given up on him independently transferring because they believed he wasn’t strong enough, that his injury made it impossible for him to be so. They were wrong. He didn’t need to get stronger. He needed to learn to move with his whole body, even though he was paralysed.

When he took his strength and integrated it with this subtler level of awareness, he could transfer. And I have tons of stories like that. When you show people how to include this subtler level of awareness, they move better. And this is really relevant to ageing. For example, take an older person who struggles to stand up and is actually afraid to do so. They think their only recourse is to engage their muscles really hard to try to stand up. But their muscles are exactly what’s dissipating as they age. So when you tell them to stand up, they’re afraid, ‘cause they’re afraid they won’t be able to do it, they’re afraid of falling. So they start to engage their muscles harder, which actually disconnects them from the space around them and disconnects them from a sense of unified balance. And this makes them ultimately weaker in the coordination of their movement. Instead, if you start to show an older person how to rock on their sit bones a little bit and then press down to their heels and they start to get the momentum, they start to see that they don’t have to be completely in control of their movement—that they can participate in a sense of direction, they are able to stand up better. Here’s another example in reverse. Stand up for a second. Can you stand up? Are you able?

Yes.

So when you go to sit down—you have a chair behind you right?

Yep.

Be more aware of the space between your butt and the chair seat and make that more tangible to your mind. Don’t just crash down. Feel that space below your butt as you drop to the chair and notice how it helps you lift your chest as you go down. So drop down and be more aware of the space around your body as you sit down. Now, as you stand back up, feel your legs but also feel a connection to your sternum and lift that as you activate your legs. It’s funny. When you tell older people to “sit on the air below your butt as you go down to the chair,” at first they think you are crazy. But when it works, they smile and sparkle with relief. But Nathan you just felt it too. So I gave you an instruction outside of your body in the unified part of your consciousness. I instructed the intangible part to connect to the space behind your rump. When you did, you had to use less effort to sit down. We should be teaching that to our elderly.

Amazing. And so, are you having to adapt the yoga for a modern kind of audience? Or do you find that you can work with these traditional practices?

Depending on what I’m talking about. I use all different kinds of language. I can’t talk about yoga too much in healthcare. They get a little freaked out. But I’m trying to get them to feel and connect with the subtle part of what they are. Like I can do it with you right now, I’m going to ask you right now to balance your head more over your neck. Notice how you have to go inward.

Yeah!
Turns out we’re moving through our lives without enough inward awareness. So teaching balance as a sensation is one of the ways you teach integration with the space around you. As soon as you balance your head over your neck you start to feel all this space better. I’m trying to say this sense of integration with the space around you is the source of compassion. Notice also the flipside of this same insight. Violence is only possible if you disconnect from the object of the forthcoming violence.

This article is part of our healing campaign at Dumbo Feather. You can access the full issue here.