



curvy voices

edited by Anna Guest-Jelley
founder of *Curvy Yoga*



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Acknowledgements

I'm not sure I'm capable of reading any of these pieces, much less the book as a whole, without feeling my heart swell to near bursting. (And, admittedly, finding a few tears in my eyes -- if not running right down my cheeks.)

I have nothing but the deepest gratitude for each person who submitted a piece for this collection. It's their courage and wholeheartedness in telling their story that will spark the flame of change toward body positivity -- both in yoga and our own lives. I know that many readers will see themselves reflected in these stories and that the pieces will open up new worlds.

What a gift.

I also want to thank two people who brought this project to life -- delightfully for me, they are my husband and best friend. Many people don't know that Curvy Yoga is a partnership, but it is. Just like our marriage, Nic Guest-Jelley is with me in this all the way -- providing tech support but, more importantly, encouragement (as well as a willingness to talk about yoga all the time!) that gives wings to what I do.

Nora Spencer has been Curvy Yoga's #1 fan since before it even really existed. And for this project, she's the one that made it beautiful -- giving us the gorgeous design we see here. When she and I sat down to discuss the design, we talked about the intention of the book -- to spark a movement of curvy voices joining together in loving their body and finding connection through yoga. She then brought it to life with her creative ideas, time and mad skills. And to think, this is just one of the million reasons why I'm glad she's in my life -- lucky me!

This book is dedicated to everyone who thought yoga and loving your body wasn't for them.

May it be of benefit.



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Introduction

by Anna Guest-Jelley
editor and founder of *Curvy Yoga*

I didn't start practicing yoga because I wanted to love my body. I started practicing yoga because I hated my body. And I wanted it to change.

When my yoga practice began, I felt betrayed by my body – not only had I never magically (or at all) lost all the weight I'd been hoping to for over almost eight years of near constant dieting at that point (I was 18), but I was also in chronic pain from migraines.

Yoga was a last-ditch effort. Frankly, I really didn't think it would work, but I was desperate and willing to try anything.

Turns out, yoga didn't work.

At least not in the way I'd expected.

You Can't Always Get What You Want

What I'd expected (or, at least, hoped for) from my practice was the svelte body of my dreams and a pain-free existence.

What I got was neither of those.

What I got instead was slowly building awareness (often very slowly). I developed the ability to identify what my body felt like when a

migraine was coming on, thus upping my chances of stopping it or at least lessening its severity. I also started to feel my feelings – or, really, notice that I had them in the first place. In addition, I began to start questioning whether or not a number on the scale was what I needed to be working toward.

What Grows From Awareness

I was able to do these things because yoga's poses and strategies got me into my body. Every time I connected my breath and my movement, I reinforced a new pathway in my mind that let me know this was possible. The same was true for every time I trusted my hunger/fullness cues. Or took the nap I needed when a migraine came on instead of continuing to plug away as though nothing was wrong.

Over time, this awareness built an awakened life.

From that consciousness, I became more and more interested in living life on my own terms, especially figuring out how on earth to have a more loving relationship with my body.

Yoga + Community



The other thing I bring to yoga is a considerable amount of work doing community building and organizing. I also come to it through a background in popular education, which values each individual's unique contribution to the conversation -- whether what is being learned/discussed is literacy, sustainability or, really, pretty much anything.

Including yoga.

Although we may not often think of yoga this way, I believe that its underlying principles are well suited to considering how we develop our practice both inwardly and outwardly. In our own bodies as well as in the body of a community (or multiple communities).

It's this idea of community that is the driving force behind *Curvy Voices*. For a good five years or so, I practiced in what often felt like isolation. Sure, I sometimes went to class, and I did meet some wonderful people there.

But I still felt like an outsider.

My Yoga Community

My body didn't look like most of the bodies in the room. I couldn't always do the poses -- at least not in the same way that seemed effortless for everyone else. Over time, I worked up enough nerve to go to class and fake confidence. **But I never felt like I'd found my tribe.**

That is, until I started Curvy Yoga. Even in its infancy, when it was just me and a couple friends, **I started to feel a sense of coming home.** A recognition that, in seeing the beautiful way that other bodies like mine could take joy in movement, I could come home to myself.

As I navigated my way through building Curvy Yoga, I kept this vision at the forefront -- that Curvy Yoga is something that both expands and

contracts. **It can give people a rootedness in both themselves and others.** And I believe that many of us, if not all of us, are looking for these feelings and experiences on some level.

All of us. That's what led me into growing Curvy Yoga to being a welcoming, body positive space for people of all shapes and sizes. Because I realized that **this sense of disconnection with our bodies doesn't only happen for folks with curvy bodies that look more like mine.** It happens for lots of us, regardless of what we might look like on the outside.

And then I realized something even more dramatic. That those of us who are looking for this -- who want to lend our voice, practice and experience to developing an inclusive yoga practice -- can stop looking and create it ourselves.

There's room for all of us.

Why This Book Was Born

And that's what I hope *Curvy Voices* will foster -- some spaciousness around the idea of who yoga is for and what effect it can have in our lives.

The thoughtful pieces in this book cover a range of embodied experiences -- birth, body image, illness, friendship, death, movement, recovery and more. **Each piece taken individually is a microcosm of yoga itself -- union with the writer's life.**

While each piece stands alone in its own wisdom, some lovely themes do emerge throughout the book: the journey that is coming to love your body, the importance of good teachers and that, although our experiences may differ, yoga is often a path within.



Collectively, the pieces yoke together to shatter myths, bust stereotypes, inspire and, perhaps most importantly, hold up a mirror.

Because **as you read, I hope you'll find a thread of yourself somewhere** -- where you've been, where you are, where you're going.

I hope that you'll connect with the writers and develop curvy community around you -- locally, online, in your own heart.

Thank you for reading and being an integral part of this community. I hope you'll share this with anyone and everyone who it might benefit; let's keep growing this curvy community!

To learn more about Curvy Yoga, including how to get certified and bring it to your town, please visit www.curvyyoga.com.





Seeking Maitri

by Martina Agona

Yoga is teaching me to love my body in a way that I never thought would be possible. It has opened up an entirely new way of thinking and self-discovery.

I am blessed with learning the practice with two awesome teachers. At no time have I ever felt that I didn't belong, wasn't good enough or wasn't welcome. **The most valuable thing that I have taken away from my classes is that by my teachers accepting me as I am, it is so much easier for me to accept myself as I am.**

The first statement I heard in class was, "Yoga meets you where you are." Wow! What a powerful statement!

Yoga is coming to me. It wants me. It embraces me. **When I breathe, it fills my soul as well as my body, and it makes me feel so strong.** I look at my foot and marvel at the bones, and I love my foot. I look at my calf muscle, and I feel my strength into the earth.

I love my large, strong calves. And yes, I look at my large breasts and gently move them out of the way. I love my big, beautiful breasts.

On some days, the practice is more difficult than others. I may feel fat, cranky or out of sorts. But if I let yoga in, I find that I can let go and feel better without even realizing it. I've been going to classes for a couple of years and am beginning to practice more frequently at home.

At home I put on some relaxing music and just try to work my way through what we did at the last class. I begin with the idea of just doing 15

or 20 minutes and it usually ends up a good 30 or 40 minutes. If I can't "get into it," I don't beat myself up; I just move on to whatever else I need to do.

Yoga is teaching me not to be so hard on myself in so many ways. **I am learning to love my body, appreciate my mind, use my talents more competently and become more patient and tolerant of people.** The folks I've met in the yoga community are the kindest folks I know. I am honored that they have accepted me as I am, and what better way to honor them than to accept myself as I am.

Namaste.



Martina Agona discovered yoga two years ago and her life has never been the same. She works as an IT Specialist by day and is a greeting card writer by night, specializing in humor that makes you smile.



Beyond Madonna's Arms

by Nancy Alder

I admit it: I am one of those yogis who came to the mat because she wanted Madonna's arms.

It was just after having my second child, and I felt my body was positively abhorrent. I was mushy in places I used to be tight; I was saggy in places I used to be slim and I had marks where I used to be completely scar-free. I was tired of sharing my body with little people and ready to reclaim it for my own.

The problem was that I hated the way it looked. So I returned to my yoga mat.

I was awkward and shaky, nervous and out of touch with who I was physically. My amazing teacher Korin created space for me to feel these ways without shame and to work towards a place of strength and pride. With her as my first official guide, I began to relearn things about my body I had forgotten with motherhood:

- 1.) ***I am strong.*** I am able to hold myself up on two feet, one foot and even two hands. I can hold two kids, a cup of coffee, a yoga mat and the keys to the house at the same time. I can hold poses for five minutes. I can sit in meditation. I can let go in Savasana.
- 2.) ***I am flexible.*** I can stretch in ways I was completely unaware were possible before a regular yoga practice. I can touch my toes and adjust my schedule to help others. I can bend over backwards in Wheel pose and for my children, without breaking in either situation. My

bendiness is present in life *and* on the mat.

- 3.) ***I can breathe.*** Yoga reminds me to stop and notice my breath. I exhale when I need to slow down and inhale when I need to keep going. I do Ujjayi instead of yelling. I do Nadi Shodhana instead of fighting insomnia. I make time to breathe.
- 4.) ***I can find new space.*** Whether I am twisting in a seated or supine position, or simply turning off my cell phone during class, yoga shows me how to create more space for myself. I have learned to claim it and not have to share it. I have learned to embrace where I can find it and accept where I cannot.

My arms look only mildly like Madonna's, and my flabbiness and scars remain. But on the inside and out I am stronger, more flexible and more in my own skin than I ever was before I started doing yoga. **I know that even if I am not Madonna's body double, I am fierce and proud of who I am and what I look like.**

That confidence, and a bit of my biceps, came from my yoga.



Nancy Alder is a 200H Registered Yoga Teacher in Connecticut. She teaches her students to connect with space and breath from a place of safety and humor. She writes for many yoga blogs and chronicles her daily practice to find yoga in all places on her own blog, [Flying Yogini](#). She is co-founder of [Teachasana](#), a site by yoga teachers for yoga teachers. When not writing or doing yoga, she is in awe of her elves, busting asanas in crazy places and counting the days until the next snowfall.



How to Move Close to 200lbs over 10KM in 1 hour

by Courtney Amo

While I believe that it is important to regularly do things that scare you, I also think it is critical that, once in a while, you do something that terrifies the \$%&.*! out of you. I decided to do one such thing in the fall of 2011.

I have had, for a number of years, a love/hate relationship with running. It is both a source of childhood humiliation and short-lived young adulthood pride. **It made me feel strong yet foolish, determined yet fearful, happy yet worried.**

Since the spring of 2011, I had been running on a treadmill at the gym. I forced myself to run even when the only machine available would provide everyone behind me with a front row seat to the hypnotizing bounce of my derrière.

Over the summer, I decided to sign up for a running clinic where I would benefit from information about proper technique and gain strength from the camaraderie of a group. The 10K part was the idea of the person who registered me.

I'm a sucker for a dare.

The first few weeks were rough. I finished last on all runs. One time, I thought I was going to vomit. Another time, I thought I was going to faint. Each week, I had to run further and faster. **It wasn't getting any easier.**

Then it got a bit easier.

On the weekends, I went running by myself in the beautiful parks near my home. I ran at my own pace. I didn't feel I had to keep up with anyone. **I felt free—really free.**

During the actual training sessions with other runners, I struggled against my ego. I had to force myself to stay at a pace that I could maintain rather than try to keep up with the group. It didn't always work. Often, I managed to keep up with the group for the first 20 minutes or so then would run out of steam and slowly watch people pass me on the left, pass me on the right. Self-doubt, self-consciousness and self-pity all welled up inside.

I often thought of quitting.

Then my body started to change. I resisted it, even tried to sabotage it. But something else was changing inside me, too. **I wanted to run in the forest again; I wanted to feel the fluidity of my hips and the ease of my breath as I got into the rhythm of the run.** I wanted to create new memories of skipping over puddles, struggling up hills and running past smiling people on the path. I kept going.

I did yoga to help my body and mind adapt.

I ran mostly by myself. I ran many times in the rain. I had the support of a great trainer who encouraged me by email. I attended clinics when I could. A few times, I didn't finish last.



During the last week of the clinic, I set out to run 10K. I had done 8K three Sundays in a row, and during the last two, felt as though I could have continued for another 2K. That day, I hit the 10K mark, at 57 minutes. I then did an extra 2K slow "victory run" to complete 12K in 1h20min.

I learned a few things over the course of those 10 weeks which I am happy to share below.

First, **the human body is amazing.** In 10 weeks, I doubled the speed at which I could run and reduced my resting heart rate by 15 beats per minute. I increased my cardiovascular capability and demonstrated that I could sustain a demanding level of physical activity for over an hour, despite my size.

I spent years angry with my body for not being what I wanted it to be; I am now amazed at its ability to transform and refine itself so quickly.

Second, "just do it" now makes sense. A number of excuses came up over the 10 weeks. **The key for me was being flexible and compassionate with myself (lessons learned from Yoga) while not letting myself off the hook.** My commitment to myself was to run four times per week, so even when I didn't want to, I pushed myself out the door and just did it. Even in the rain. Even in the cold. Even when I didn't have music to encourage me.

Third, moving close to 200lbs over 10 KM simply requires moving. However slow at first, however fast in the end. One foot ahead of the other. One breath at a time. The breath work done in yoga was a tremendous help in those moments when I simultaneously wanted to stop and wanted to keep going, when I wasn't sure my system could take it, when I wanted to push myself that little bit further. **Deep inhale. Complete exhale. One foot ahead of the other.**

Fourth, running, like yoga, like life itself, is a personal practice. No one can do it for you. To do any one of these three things well requires you to 1) get comfortable with being alone with yourself; 2) respect yourself and your decision to grow; 3) understand and appreciate that things take time and 4) know that **your body, whatever its size, shape or age, is beautifully designed and amazingly capable of change.**

None of this is easy to do or accept. However, both yoga and running create time and space for growth, and through these activities I am slowly bridging the gap between who I think I am and who I really am.



Courtney Amo is a certified Hatha Yoga Instructor and has been practicing yoga since 1999. Courtney has been teaching Yoga professionally since 2004. After undertaking Big Yoga training with Meera Patricia Kerr, she developed and taught "Yoga for Round Bodies" classes and currently teaches students of all ages, shapes and sizes both at her local YMCA and at her home in Moncton, New Brunswick. Courtney's been running in the mud and snow as of late. Her and her 200lbs hope to train for a half-marathon in the Spring of 2012. Visit Courtney at her website, [Mahaa Yoga](#).



Building (and Rebuilding) the Bridge to My Body

by Robin Dunn Bryant

My mother always described me as big and awkward. I'm not sure if that was supposed to motivate me in some way or not; I just know that from an early age I gravitated away from anything that seemed too "girly." I was the consummate tomboy, far more comfortable in jeans than a tutu, and **yoga was just a strange ritual that people from India and odd white folks did.** My youth was spent on fields or courts or just running through the streets.

I moved my body because I could and gave it little consideration.

I divorced my body after I graduated from high school. I still fed, clothed and occasionally moved it, but for the most part I lived from the neck up. I went to a large Midwestern university and didn't fit in with my peers for a host of reasons, though the one I focused on was my body.

I decided that I *was* big and awkward and often felt that people (read: men) looked right through me. I ate, smoked and drank a lot. I moved only to get to class (when I went) and to dance (when I danced). I spent years in a funk and didn't emerge until I got pregnant.

Suddenly, instead of scrutinizing everything I ate, I ate with a purpose and based on my whims or the baby's. My belly got rounder, my breasts fuller, and I **swear I strutted everywhere I**

went. My body during that time was so amazing to me. I could actually grow another human being! And the midwives, who were to deliver my daughter, encouraged me to eat.

I was 25, and that was the first time I didn't worry about my weight.

After the baby was born, I went numb again. I battled through 2 years of post-partum depression, a cross-country move and the rigors of graduate school. I moved only to get to class (when I went) and dance (when I danced). I spent years in a funk and didn't emerge until I wanted to get pregnant again.

I'd recently gotten married, and my husband and I decided that we wanted to have at least one more child. I went to my primary care physician for a checkup, and she encouraged me to try to lose some weight first. So off to the home gym I went. My husband and I put together workouts and even started doing hot yoga in the house.

We changed the way we were eating; I started riding my bike to the metro station near our house and walking from the station to work each day. The pounds melted away. I felt stronger. I started to feel comfortable in my skin again.

And then I was diagnosed with breast cancer.



*I have to stop here. Just for a moment. It's been six years since this happened, and whenever I think about this time in my history, I cry. It wasn't just that I was feeling comfortable in my skin; I felt amazing. I'd been so out of touch with my body for so long, and I was thrilled to see that I still had muscle memory for things I loved. And the challenge I felt with the yoga was incredible. Here was a different kind of movement, and unlike what I'd thought in the past, it suited me. I was terrified, heartbroken and worst of all, I felt betrayed. I come from a long line of healthy women. I hadn't had more than a cold in over 15 years. I had been preparing myself to have another baby (and perhaps to feel the blissful feelings I had being pregnant), and now I had to worry about what type of treatment to have and whether I would live to see my daughter graduate. **As much as I wanted to, I couldn't go numb.** I was fully aware of my body—and terrified of it.*

I was in active treatment for a year, and I didn't exercise or practice at all.

After I completed radiation, we joined our neighborhood YMCA, and I started taking yoga twice a week. The class was an all levels class and was virtually the same every time. Early on I stumbled through sun salutations and spent plenty of time in Child's Pose – usually cursing my broken body. Eventually I found myself moving easily through poses and would find myself marveling at what I could do instead of what I couldn't. **I decided I wanted to complete yoga teacher training so I could teach classes to other breast cancer patients and survivors.**

Fast forward and I'm having a tantrum on my mat during an Ashtanga focused weekend at

my 200 hour training. I have osteoarthritis pain in my knee and am struggling to keep up with my (insert younger, thinner, more flexible, more practiced...) classmates. My instructor wanders by my mat and starts talking to me.

"Robin," she says, **"no matter what you can or can't do, you will still be able to teach your students. Yoga is about building a relationship with your own body."** Simple, right? Just simple enough for me to set aside my fool ego and figure out ways to work around or through some things I struggled with. My first modifications? Swapping some of the Surya Namaskar Bs for As and only doing the vinyasas in between poses.

As the training continued, I became both more confident in and more connected to my body. I tried classes that I would have never considered years earlier and felt myself going increasingly stronger. Two months before I graduated, I started teaching in two studios in my town.

My "ideal" student has changed since the beginning. I teach a free weekly class for breast cancer patients and survivors, but I also look for ways to reach students who would be considered on the "fringes" of stereotypical yoga students.

I am most excited about teaching yoga to those students: **people who never thought yoga could be for them.**

I set myself in front of them as an example: my body may not look like the ones seen in yoga magazines and my poses are not textbook poses. But the benefits I get from my yoga practice are just as real as anyone else's and the small little world I create on my mat is a place where I can find the truth in my body that

The small little world I create on my mat is a place where I can find the truth in my body that will allow me to live better.



will allow me to live better. There is so much healing in that. It is my honor to be able to share that with others.



Robin Dunn Bryant started practicing yoga after her husband, a Brazilian Jiu Jitsu practitioner preparing for a competition, began taking hot yoga classes. Her husband was instantly hooked and bought a couple of mats for their house. Robin's practice began in the family's home gym, complete with as many space heaters as they could plug in at one time. She started practicing yoga in earnest in 2007 after a bout with breast cancer. The treatments left Robin in a body that she hardly recognized and with a high level of physical and emotional disconnection. She found her connection while practicing yoga and knew that she wanted to share that feeling with others. Robin has a Master of Fine Arts in Creative Writing (Poetry) from Virginia Commonwealth University and almost immediately as she deepened her practice she started integrating writing into her personal practice. Connect with her at [her website](#), [on Facebook](#) and [on Twitter](#).



Finding Acceptance Through Yoga

by Toni C

Initially, yoga was about weight loss/ maintenance and fitness for me. It was really just exercise. Savasana was actually torture in the beginning; I just couldn't get still.

Along the way, I began to think maybe yoga would help me get my head straight and then the weight issue would disappear.

Like magic.

Build enough *tapas* and it would just burnnnnnn off.

Over the past 15 years, something did begin to happen. **I noticed how I felt, and not just physically, when I practiced regularly.** That practice benefited me through all the levels of my body—physical, spiritual, mental and emotional. I began to be able to get still—to sit in meditation—to feel the shifts as they were happening and not fear them.

Last year I read an article in *The Magazine of Yoga* and found Curvy Yoga, which led me to learning about Health at Every Size (HAES) and the whole body loving movement because of yoga. **I began the journey of ending dieting and learning to accept myself wholly** (still at work at it, of course; it's a lifetime commitment, you know!) because of finding those things.

I discovered that I deserved happiness, peace and relief now, not just when I lost weight.

I injured my shoulder a few years ago and have had to learn to modify many postures while in class to accommodate it. Initially when I injured myself, I pushed through the pain and suffered physically because of it. I was angry that it stopped me from going where I wanted to go.

Now, though, I know that my injured shoulder has helped me to learn to accommodate other parts of my body as well. To know that (as my favorite teacher puts it) I am no closer to God if I can get my face to the floor in a wide-legged forward fold. To listen when my body or sometimes my spirit says back off. To learn to stay on my mat and not compare myself with others. **That my practice is perfect for me, as I am now, in this moment.**

Because this moment is all I really have.

I would tell people who think yoga isn't for them to not let stereotypes get in the way of something that can be so beneficial to your life. If I had done that, I would never have met some of the wonderful people who are in my life today. People I met in a yoga class. People who loved and accepted me as I was before I even knew I needed to do it myself.



Toni C lives in the Philadelphia area with her family (a husband, two sons and a puppy). In 2005, while pregnant with her first son, she got her 200 hour yoga teacher certificate at Inner Fire Yoga. She attends class regularly at a local studio and maybe one day will aspire to open her own! For now she is content with subbing when she can and being a mommy and a wife.



Finding "Supportive Yoga"

by Annie Carlin

I found yoga in college when one of my roommates suggested that I try a free class in Manhattan. That class completely floored me – literally; I think I ended up on the floor, but I continued to go back. When I finally jumped from Basics to Intermediate, I fell head over heels in love with yoga, including the asana and spiritual practice.

When I went home to my parents' that evening, I told them, **"This is it. This is what I have been waiting for my entire life."**

All of my life I have struggled with weight. According to family legend, when I was a young toddler, my perceptive and kind pediatrician looked at me and told my parents, "she's in for a lifelong battle with her weight."

Truer words have never been spoken.

When I was 3 years old, my parents enrolled me in dance classes. I ended up loving it and danced from age 3 to age 16. Not all of the memories are happy ones, though. At the age of 6, I remember being told by my ballet teacher that although I was a very good dancer, I really needed to lose weight in order to be better. Sad, isn't it? That one of my earliest memories involves my body being criticized.

Since dancing, yoga was the first movement I did that really resonated with me. It wasn't until I started practicing 4–5 times per week at a studio that I loved, though, that my body started to change. All of a sudden, I had muscles, and I was dropping weight so fast, I didn't notice until my pants wouldn't stay up. Everyone praised

my transformation, told me how pretty I was and how wonderful yoga must be.

I was sure this change was permanent. I reveled in my new body, delighting in the difficult yoga poses I was able to do – scorpion handstand was a personal favorite. I'd never been happier – and it was easy. I didn't diet; I didn't have to try. All I had to do was the yoga I loved with such passion.

This is it. This is what I have been waiting for my entire life.

This time was when I first started kicking around the idea of becoming a yoga teacher.

Of course, the change was not permanent, and it is incredibly difficult for me to write about how I felt then – the ego, the naiveté that all my problems were solved – **in fact, they were just beginning.**

I moved away from Brooklyn to Washington, DC. I left everyone and everything that I loved, sure that I'd be fine since Brooklyn was only 4 hours away. I wasn't. By November, I'd had a full nervous breakdown, fueled in part by the fact that I hadn't been able to find one yoga class that I actually wanted to attend again.

My life and my practice fell apart. I was put on various psychotropic drugs to enable me to function, and at first I lost even more weight. Not recognizing that I was seriously ill, I was praised even more heavily for the changes in my body.



The silver lining at that moment was that I was offered a chance to apprentice with my beloved yoga teachers in Brooklyn during winter break that year. I think that is what brought me back from the brink, and I consider that apprenticeship to be of the best things I have ever done. **I knew after that month that I not only wanted to be a yoga teacher, but I needed to be one.**

Life intervened, though, and suddenly my plans to do yoga teacher training were on hold. As I climbed out of my anxiety disorder, I started to gain weight. And as I recovered, the medications I was on started to cause the usual side effects, including weight gain. As with my initial loss, I didn't notice until none of my clothes fit and my body stopped cooperating.

By the time I graduated from my master's degree program, I had gained back all of the weight I'd lost and then some. My yoga practice as I knew it was gone. I was angry and scared, sure that teacher training was now a pipe dream.

How could I become a teacher, when I couldn't even practice the way I wanted?

I waited for the weight to come off – used it as an excuse for why I wasn't practicing, why I had abandoned becoming a yoga teacher. But it didn't come off – in fact, despite assurances from my doctors, it continued to increase. I tried to reclaim my yoga practice, but it was so frustrating that I came away from class crying and even angrier than I was when I began.

After some time, I did get to the point where I was able to do a modified but satisfactory practice when I was with my teachers in Brooklyn. With their support, I finally convinced myself to sign up for teacher training.

With all my physical and mental walls in tow plus an unexpected nasty sinus infection, I got on my mat for session one, completely terrified.

It turned out that not only did I make it through that first session, I loved it! It helped, of course, that I had five wonderful teachers at my side the minute I was not feeling well. But I really appreciated that no one cared that I wasn't the "typical" yoga student. I had such high expectations for yoga teacher training after having put it off for so many years, and I was shocked that they were all fulfilled and more.

I quickly signed up to do the remaining sessions.

I had been teaching here and there. I noticed that most of my students came to me because they did not feel comfortable going to a regular yoga class, with reasons including: never doing yoga before, being intimidated or working with some struggle in their bodies.

I started developing sequences like, "everything you need to know to walk into any yoga class in America" and "how to modify around an injury" with the vague idea that I was catering to a particular client base but no way to articulate what I was doing. Teacher training really helped me develop a vision which would eventually become the concept of "Supportive Yoga," which is the foundation of how I teach my yoga classes now.

I realize now that my body and my experience puts me in a fantastic position to show others that yoga is accessible, that peace with your body is attainable no matter what your practice looks like. And that my body is an advantage in my yoga teaching career because I can relate to my students' struggles and offer ways to begin to treat the body as a trusted friend rather than the enemy.



It is hard, ongoing work, but it is important work. And for me, it is the core of my *ahimsa* practice toward myself.



Annie Carlin approaches her yoga teaching based on the firm belief that everyone can practice and accept the benefits of yoga regardless of race, creed, fitness level, body type and gender. Her goal for her classes is to create a safe space for all to enjoy the mental, physical and spiritual benefits of yoga. Annie emphasizes self-acceptance and specializes in customizing poses and sequences to suit her students' practice. Annie's training incorporates asana principles from the Ashtanga and Iyengar traditions as well as detailed anatomy study and wisdom from the yoga spiritual traditions.



Not Taking it Laying Down

by Dee Di Memmo

When I was 17, I took a community school class on yoga. This was in the late 1980s, and yoga was not part of the common American lexicon. It was myself, a few recovering hippies and a person who look liked they wandered in by mistake. We didn't have any cute outfits or designer mats; we used the mats from the Junior High gymnasium. It was a hatha yoga class, and there weren't any fancy mirrors or anything fluffy like that. No incense or meditation music. **This was yoga, down and dirty.**

And I fell in love.

I don't have the typical body type for yoga.

I am, ahem, curvy. Curvy does not mean inflexible; it just means that I am zaftig. Rubenesque, if you will. I have hips, breasts and a big booty. My belly is soft and rounded. I will never be super model stick thin, and that's ok.

Yoga has helped me accept what I have been given as a miraculous vessel to travel through life.

There have been times when I have walked into a yoga class where I am the only larger woman. I have had people stare at me, sometimes even snicker, because I am not this tall, lithe yogini in the designer yoga pants on the designer mat.

You can tell I've been doing this a long time, though, because my mat is worn out where my hands and feet are planted. I like expressive yoga because it's easier to disguise my grunts and groans. I may not be able to do inversions

or some of the plank poses, but that's ok. **My body tells me what I need to do and when to stop.** I don't have to be thin to balance. I don't have to be thin to be strong. I most certainly don't have to be long and lean to feel that Zen euphoria that envelops me after class.

When we are in Savasana, we are all equal.

It doesn't matter if you are tall, short, thin, fat, whatever. We are all lying there, in corpse pose. From ashes we were made, and to ashes we will return. Our dress size won't be on our tombstones. How we lived our lives will be reflected by those who mourn us.

I most certainly don't have to be long and lean to feel that Zen euphoria that envelops me after class.

Yoga has helped me accept the body I was born into. No, it might not be like a Hollywood starlet's body, and that's ok. **I feel like a rock star most days, and I carry myself like that.** I have learned to embrace my curves and appreciate them. Yoga has helped me develop focus and learn to appreciate the space between breaths. I have learned the difference between doing and being.

I think it's made me smarter too, but I can't prove that.



Dee Di Memmo is married and is the adoptive mom of a 9-year-old who practices yoga with her. She's also a writer (check out [her blog here](#)), youth minister and financial counselor for folks with chronic illness. Connect with her [on Facebook](#).



Body Envy

by Barbara Denowh

As I sunk into the bathtub last night in utter defeat, I happened to notice all the random shampoo bottles people have left there. **It's like I run a hostel.** Guests are a frequent thing. And they all seem to leave a shampoo or a face wash or some other item that didn't make the cut back into the suitcase or was forgotten about completely.

There I was, slumped in the tub, staring into space, and trying to find anything, absolutely anything I could write about for lovely Anna's collection on body love and yoga. I contemplated how I came to yoga: I hated (still hate) running because it not only makes my body feel like crap, but it makes my boobs hurt.

Seriously. And, how much fun is it to wear two sports bras when you are trying to breathe?!

Just another girl uncomfortable in her own body.

And, I don't really want to tell the broken part of the story. **It seems we all have some version of the story: something bad happens, things fall apart, you rediscover yourself on the yoga mat.**

So, I sat there. Then I put on my yoga toes (the rubber toe spreader things, not the socks you wear when you are naked and miraculously balancing on your tits...). I felt my feet spread out. I'm pretty sure I heard them say "Aaahhh." I could feel the webbing between my toes and that super tender spot just at the base of the toe;

my calves released and then that spot behind the knee let go and so did my jaw.

I kept staring at one shampoo bottle. It was orange. Orange is apparently my "shiny." And **all I could read on the bottle was: Body Envy.**

I know, right?! This is either genuinely deep or absurdly lame.

We often talk about how yoga changed us or changed our bodies, but what about what it creates?

As I contemplated body envy (the actual torture we all put ourselves through, not the 2-in-1 shampoo), I glanced down at my legs. I love how my legs look in water, all cut and muscular. My version of the skinny mirror (come on, I know you've noticed these mirrors, too).

My legs. My short tree trunks. My dad always said, "your legs may be

short, but at least they hit the ground." Hi-yo! **I have hated my legs forever.** I hate wearing shorts 'cause the inside legs always ride up and then my vast, milky white thighs are visible (did this just turn x-rated?). I hate wearing dresses, too.

Back to the "broken and then discovers yoga" bit.

For a very, very long time, my intention for my practice, the intention I set each time I hit the mat was to be strong. And, I'll be goddammed if it didn't actually happen.

We often talk about how yoga changed us or changed our bodies, but what about what it



creates? What it uncovers? What about that strength your practice gives you in so many ways?

Sure, that intention of strength manifested in me physically. In yoga workshops, classes or teacher trainings, I hear the mumbles of other students and teachers that say, "wow, she is strong." I've developed physical strength. But, I've also discovered so much more.

How many people do you know who can feel the webbing between their toes or know there is a special spot at the base of toe that is just tender?

My awareness of my body has also gotten stronger. **I think there is something so powerful about awareness, about being able to feel the back of your knee that really translates into loving the being that you are.**
Into loving the being that I am.

This is what my practice has given me.

It is the simplicity of the practice, the simple act of spreading the toes, not some contorted pose, that allows me to be comfortable in my own skin.



Barbara Denowh rambles about teaching yoga and other randomness at her blog [babsbabble](#). She owns a sweet little studio in Helena, Montana, that's the home of \$5 yoga. Connect with her [on Facebook](#) or [Twitter](#).



Awakening to Love

by Emily Dykstra

Before I began practicing yoga, I was a 299+ curvy woman who really had no connection to my body. It was this thing, this source of frustration and pain; self-flagellation was my practice. I had some friends that gushed over the glory of yoga, though, so about five years ago I took a chance on a 6 week class specifically designed for "round bodies."

While I had taken a few other classes prior to this, it was this series that cracked open my heart and awakened my body.

Once a week on a Thursday evening, I drove through the city filled with anticipation. **It was through the classes designed especially for my body that I found permission to accept myself.** I found peace and delight in what it could do. I slowly began to see myself inhabiting my body; I really connected to it in a way that I had not felt since I was a child. I was hooked!

Fast forward a few years, and I am still a 299+ woman except now I have this burning seed of yoga love in my soul. I can't stop thinking about how it's helped me learn to love who I was on and off the mat. I began to want to share that with others. **Last fall I took a leap and, with the stars aligned and a lot of support from the people who love me, signed up for what I like to call Yoga Camp** (a two week teacher training program) offered by Samarya Center taught by Molly Lannon Kenny & Stephanie Sisson.

Driving through the mountains to this yoga retreat, I felt my heart speed up as the elevation

rose. All the wild voices ran rampant in my head, "Turn around, turn around!" "You are so not going to fit in there." "What the hell were you thinking?"

It seemed like my fears were going to be confirmed when I began to meet the other yogis entering into this sangha. **By far I was the curviest, and that's always a contest, right?** I went naturally to the place of comparison and found only myself lacking. We lined our mats up, our teachers entered...then it began...the most physically & emotionally taxing two weeks of my life and ultimately a baptism of love.

Molly and Stephanie took every opportunity to show us not just yogic knowledge; they actively helped me learn how to accept myself just as I am in this moment. I began to get how easy it is for me to frame things as "I can't because..." I've placed so many limits and judgments upon myself.

At yoga camp, I stretched more than my body; I stretched my soul to accept the possibility of my enoughness.

Since last fall's transformational yoga camp, I have been a little shell shocked as I struggled to learn how to incorporate what I gained at the training into my daily life bit by bit. I was surrounded by so much love there, and in the real world, that is not exactly the case. Except that I am learning it is...the more open, self-accepting, loving and compassionate I am with myself, the more I receive.



What I wish to share the most with others is what I have been given through the gift of yoga. I want more souls to see their own magnificent divinity. **I want other people to fall in love with themselves and their lives, just as I have had the opportunity to through this blessing called yoga.** With yoga, I am learning how to practice on and off the mat—really learning to weave the 8 limbs into my life: in the way I eat; the way I practice; and the way I work, play and love.

I am a yogi. And that is such a beautiful thing.

If I could say anything to someone curious about yoga but hesitant to try, I'd say—please give yourself the gift of that one moment to play, to be, to breathe on that mat. You are so deserving of what it can offer you. Don't let one class, one teacher, one student dissuade you from your path. Yoga can help you reconnect to the miracle that is you.

Peace, love & light to you all on your journeys.



Emily Dykstra is a yoga teacher based in Seattle, WA. She has studied at [Samarya Center](#), and she believes yoga can help change the world—just by helping people learn to love themselves and then sharing that love within our communities. She is interested in teaching people new to yoga or who are interested in creating their own personal at-home practice. She has nearly 20 years of experience helping people transform their lives through her social service work and is excited to be moving in this new direction where she can share her love of yoga professionally. To learn about what else she is up to in this beautiful world, please visit: www.yogaloverevolution.com. Her lovely pic was taken by the talented Arissa Sims.



Full (-Figured) Circle

by Elizabeth Gallo

Not long before I entered yoga teacher training, I had my second baby in two years. I was overwhelmed with the responsibility and work of caring for two small people, and I was exhausted. Empty, too, in a way – literally and figuratively. I needed something. For me.

It was during my pregnancies that my yoga practice started to become more meaningful and deepen. I had practiced intermittently in my scattered twenties, but in pregnancy, yoga taught me to nurture a deeper connection with my growing babies, my role as a mom and my true self. Prenatal yoga also eliminated one of the scary things about yoga – I was never the only "big" girl in the room.

Everyone had some sort of belly, and it was celebrated and encouraged.

Returning to the studio after giving birth was joyous, but nerve-wracking, too. Now I wasn't pregnant; I was just fat. I was still in maternity wear, and unlike some moms, my fat wasn't disappearing as I nursed. So what to do? To get back on the mat or not?

The class that worked best with my schedule was taught by the studio's owner, Anna Winkler. Anna never seemed to care what someone looked like or where they came from. She had equal offerings for all students – from philosophy to asana adjustments; she was all business in the best way. There was no favoriting the best

dressed or "most advanced" yogis. Everyone got the benefit of the depth and breadth of her practice and teaching experience.

As I was finding my way as a mother to two young girls, Anna welcomed and nurtured me in a way a mother would – encouraging me to try not just new poses but new classes. She taught and adjusted me with a love pat and a chuckle. She understood the physical challenges I had and easily found ways for me to be comfortable (and safe) in each pose.

My teacher saw through
my big body,
questioning mind, and
not-so-strong practice to
my heart, which loved
yoga enough to want to
share it with others.

I was a die-hard in her Monday night class, but I even did a stint in her Tuesday/Thursday Ashtanga class. Led practice on Tuesdays, Mysore on Thursdays. Did I look and feel like an idiot? Probably. I would soak through my clothes in the first fifteen minutes, doing Surya Namaskars at half the rate of the yogis

around me, but I was so hungry for yoga that I didn't mind. I loved it, in fact. And someday I will probably take up Ashtanga practice again.

The yoga that grounded and sustained me during my pregnancies was now the key to rest, recovery, and revitalization in motherhood. My body was a wreck, my mind scattered, my heart overflowing with love for my growing family. **And here, on the yoga mat, in Anna's classes, I could allow myself to turn inward to myself and feel full with the divine light within me.**



One week, I noticed the studio was offering an immersion and teacher training. Oh, how I wanted to do it! But I felt like I couldn't – that it would be ridiculous, in fact. My huge, doughy body, my awkward yoga, my bits and pieces of knowledge of the philosophy behind it all – this wasn't the basis for a teacher trainee. But Anna seemed to disagree – she suggested I take it. Um. Wow.

So I did. And it was awesome.

I was given a gift to be guided by someone who believes that yoga is for everyone – that there is a variation of every pose for every body, that yogis come in all shapes and sizes – and that they all arrive on the mat at different times in different ways for different reasons. My teacher saw through my big body, questioning mind, and not-so-strong practice to my heart, which loved yoga enough to want to share it with others.

Fast-forward a couple of years, and I am honored to be teaching the Monday evening class, the very class that solidified my dedication to my yoga practice. **What a way to come full circle in study and practice -- every time I see my name on the schedule in that slot, I bow in gratitude.**

One Monday, I wasn't feeling so jazzed about the class I taught, thinking it was a bit disjointed (or a lot disjointed), when a new student came up to talk to me. She was glowing and had a big smile on her face.

"Thank you so much!" she said. "I loved it! I'm so excited; I signed up for your series!"

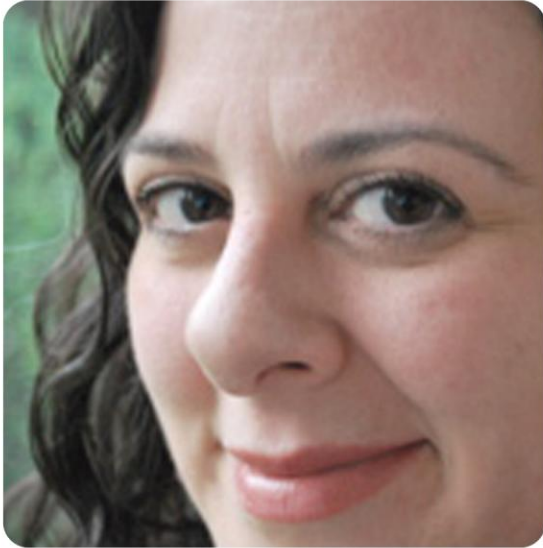
I was so surprised. And grateful. "I'm so glad you enjoyed the practice!" I'm sure I was smiling as much as she was to hear her enthusiasm.

We were both full of exclamation points, to be sure.

"I've tried yoga before, but no one looked like me. The teacher had no idea how to teach me and my boobs..."

And now she is me. She is the next in a long line of yogis before me to be welcomed on to the mat to practice -- like me, like Anna and everyone before us. Because it doesn't matter what you look like, where you came from, or whether you're fat or thin. Maybe she won't decide to pursue a teacher training program, but she's out there on her mat somewhere. She's there with her boobs and her belly -- and everything else about her that is pure beauty -- practicing her yoga.

She is the light. She is the yoga. Aren't we all?



Elizabeth Gallo studies and teaches yoga in Maplewood, New Jersey, where she lives with her husband and two young daughters. A graduate of the ShaktiBody yoga teacher training program, Elizabeth also earned certifications in prenatal and baby and me yoga through Kelli DeFlora of Starseed Yoga. She has recently completed her chair yoga teacher training to further expand the populations with which she can share this practice. In addition to teaching public yoga classes, Elizabeth also volunteers with Newark Yoga Movement, an organization that provides yoga instruction to the students in Newark Public Schools. Elizabeth is an accomplished writer and contributes to [Teachasana](#), the website for yoga teachers. You can read more of Elizabeth's journey [on her blog](#) and follow her on Twitter [@elizabethgallo](#).



Tell Me What You Love

by Katie Garcia

I've been struggling with what to write for this collection. I'm not a writer; I haven't been in school in a little while, and quite frankly, I'm rusty. If it isn't a quick e-mail sent to a co-worker or a friend, I can't tell you the last time I sat down and just wrote for an extended period of time. I batted around several ideas, but the other day **I was struck with inspiration in the most unlikely of spots – a professional development workshop.**

Traditionally, our professional development workshops leave a little bit to be desired, but this one I had been looking forward to – we were bringing Lee Mun Wah – a well-known anti-racist activist and intergroup dialogue guru. I had studied Lee Mun Wah in graduate school, and **this was the opportunity to learn from one of the greatest.**

During the workshop, he asked us to brainstorm the many ways we invite a new person to engage in a conversation with us – particularly someone from another country. For example, many well-intentioned folks ask questions like, "Where are you from?" or the well-meaning but completely offensive, "Wow; you speak such great English." These are questions that either required just one word or could completely shut a person down.

As we listened, Wah shared his favorite question to ask: "Tell me what you love"—so simple but so inviting.

I feel like a badass. I feel strong in my warrior pose.

So my fellow curvy yoga practitioners, I want to take a minute and tell you what I love about being fat and practicing yoga...

1. **I love when my body surprises me and moves into poses I didn't think it could.**

Pigeon pose anyone? Twisted side angle? Yoga teaches me to trust my body and that she'll teach me my limits, not the other way around.

2. **I know that competition seems to be the antithesis of practicing yoga...**but we've all been in a class surrounded by "yoga bodies," and then we shift into a complicated pose and rock it. Someone else might fall over or struggle, but you lean into your pose and nail it. I know, I know...but come on, we've all been there! IT FEELS GOOD.

3. **Yoga blisses me out.** I'm not sure if blisses is a word, but for this purpose we're going to make it one. And I think many of you can relate. I have struggled with anxiety and depression for quite some time now, and the last few years as I've transitioned out of graduate school and into a professional career, it's become worse. Yoga is the gift I give myself, my brain and that weird feeling in my chest when I feel anxious. For an hour I can just be free and not think of all the things that are weighing me down. Yoga is peace for me.

4. **I love catching sight of myself in the mirror** – especially in one of the warrior poses. I feel like a bad ass. I feel strong in my warrior pose. I feel recharged. I feel like all of that terrible shit in the world doesn't stand a chance against me. So it better watch out.



5. **My all-time favorite thing I love most...it's a chance for me to connect with my dad.** I took him to his first yoga class two years ago, and he's been going back ever since. Now, he's a big guy, too, and if he reads this he'll probably cringe (I love you, Dad!), but he loves yoga. I love it when he calls me after class to talk about the different poses and how he's enjoying them. I am so blessed to have a dad willing to try new things with me. **Yoga is one of things that bonds us though we are thousands of miles apart.**

So there you have it my curvy yoga family, the things that I love so much about yoga. Now it's your turn, tell me--what is it you love about curvy yoga.....



Katie Garcia is a queer fat femme who relocated to the south a few years ago in hopes of infusing it with her radical feminist views and shaking shit up. A yoga practitioner for the past ten years, die hard book nerd and mom to the most amazing Beagle on the planet. Check her out at www.hellokatiepillar.tumblr.com



Getting Comfortable in the Skin I'm In

by Mara Glatzel

I was one of those little kids playing on the mats at the back of the yoga class with carrot juice in hand while my mother moved through poses.

I've been doing yoga - not particularly well, nor consistently - but doing yoga all the same, for nearly as long. My experience is often the same:

I show up at the class, visibly a curvy woman. I'm wearing all of the *right clothes* and have my fancy yoga mat in tow. The class starts. Somewhere in the middle of the class the yoga teacher breathes, *Oh my, you are so flexible*, with a look of surprise.

I remember the first day that I realized that what the yoga teacher meant was *I didn't expect you to be so flexible, because you are overweight.*

I had always been curvy and flexible -- I hadn't quite realized that it was at all surprising until my early twenties. At the time, it made me feel self-conscious, as if it hadn't occurred to me before that anyone would be thinking about my body in that way. I was surprised that they always looked to me when they discussed what kind of adjustments could be made to the pose to accommodate my curvy body.

For me, growing up, doing yoga was one of the only times that I could firmly feel myself inside my skin without becoming uncomfortable, nervous, or disassociating. **It was my anchor.** It

brought me back from the brink, when my body had become unrecognizable to me due to my propensity towards compulsive eating. It healed me when I was sick and bloated with Candida. It was what I clung to after the dangerous disturbance of a binge.

It pulled me back from the ledge and settled me back in my body, kindly.

Doing yoga was one of the only times that I could firmly feel myself inside my skin without becoming uncomfortable, nervous, or disassociating.

I learned to love the feeling in my limbs after practicing, but I never went to a class. Classes made me distinctly nervous.

In writing this essay, I thought about what kept me on the mat over the years, as

well as what kept me from getting discouraged by the weight bias that I have experienced in some professional classes. **I have been lucky because I was taught young, and I often practice in the comfort of my own living room.**

I have been lucky because the pros have always outweighed that moment of self-consciousness.

When my feet touched my mat, I was able to bring myself back to the earth -- to my body,



from the abyss of my own creation. Now that I no longer feel the need to travel as deeply or as darkly, it quietly reminds me to pay attention to the feeling of my body.

My body.

The body that I was born with. The body that I carry around with me. The body that is my home.

This is much different than my-body-in-clothing or my body *in front of the mirror* or my body as viewed through the lens of someone else.

When my feet touch the mat -- my physical body, my heart, my personal strength -- is the only body that I am able to pay attention to.

I couldn't be more grateful for the opportunity to sink so deeply into my skin.



Mara Glatzel is a body image warrior and [self-love coach](#). She spends the majority of her time causing a ruckus on [Medicinal Marzipan](#), where she blogs (almost) daily about correcting your relationship with your body and food, creating relationships that are fulfilling, and living your life in the best possible way. Catch up with her body loving updates on [twitter](#), [facebook](#), or [send her an email](#).



Fertility, Body Image and Trust

by Anna Guest-Jelley

When I got married, I had no intentions of getting pregnant -- then or ever. You've never seen someone so diligent about taking her birth control. And if I accidentally skipped a pill, I just didn't have sex. Back-up methods weren't good enough for me.

I really hate to write this in public, but something changed for me over time. After I'd been married more than four but less than five years, **I started having baby dreams.** And I started cooing over babies (and even cute baby pics on Facebook).

I mean, sure, I'd always found babies cute in person. (I'm not a terrible person.) But that was kinda the extent of it: "Oh, your baby is so cute!" And then I moved on. **I had about as much attachment to it as seeing a cute puppy** (and, honestly, probably less. I *really* love puppies).

So once I started feeling that shift, I had three alternating thoughts: (1) My mom wasn't right, was she? (2) Does this mean the biological clock, which I've mocked so many times, is real? (3) Oh, crap.

And, oh, yeah; one more: I want a baby.

Right. Now.

It's strange to make the shift from not wanting a baby to wanting a baby. In fact, I wanted a

baby so much that I was afraid to let myself think about it, much less say it out loud. You see, for years (way before I got into wanting-a-baby mode), I joked (totally unfunny and fear-based, I now realize) that I was probably infertile. What with somewhat terrible genetics, a lifetime on Rx drugs for migraines and Polycystic Ovarian Syndrome, I didn't think the odds were in my favor.

That was funny when I was obsessing about the pill and fretting over getting pregnant when I didn't want to be.

It was less funny on the other side of things.

On the other side, I wasn't amused by that possibility. I was terrified by it. Because I was pretty sure I was still right -- that I wouldn't be able to get pregnant even if I wanted to.

I've spent years absent from my body. If my body was a school child, it would totally be the one who gets a knock on the door from Child Protective Services for missing too much school. "Anna hasn't been present for the past 22 years. We're beginning to think that 'cold she just can't shake' might have a little more to it. What gives?"

Turns out that what gives is me. Or, rather, a lack thereof.

I'm a compulsive eater. And I've been in or out of a binge cycle, in or out of a diet for the



majority of my life. Just when I start to shift out of it, I dive right back in -- headfirst, of course (as though there's any other way).

So when I finally started to walk away from the pool so that diving in wasn't even an option, I ran smack into a giant baby (although not literally because that would be *so* creepy).

I felt like I had a choice to make: submit to dieting for fertility or trust my body (knowing full well, or so I assumed, that to do so meant that I would in no way ever become pregnant).

As you can probably tell, I'm not super great with gray areas. Black/white thinking fits my needs much better -- or at least that's what I tell myself. Either I can be at peace with my body and accept that I'll never get pregnant or I can make myself miserable by constantly dieting, suppressing my intuition at every turn, and maybe (*big* maybe, though, because dieting has never "worked" for me, nor does it for the majority of people) I'd be able to get pregnant.

So here's where I am now: **I'm no longer able to choose the second choice.** I've been spending too much time trying to (get this) listen *and* trust my body to go back. I mean, I totally could go back; don't get me wrong. It would actually be the significantly easier choice. But I can't trust myself anymore if I do that. And at the end of the day, that's really all I've got -- good ole Anna, for better or worse.

Instead, I'm choosing to connect *more* to my body. To love myself *more*. To hear others' advice and take what resonates, not what is shaming, *more*. And to listen to my internal wisdom (including following whatever food cues it gives me) *more*.

That doesn't mean a million (and one) fears don't come up, though. For now, these fears include (a) I will never get pregnant, (b) I have

ruined my health and now have to suffer the consequences, (c) I'm not a "real" woman -- even though I don't believe such a thing exists, (d) that I'll become obsessed with pregnancy and ruin my relationship because of it, (e) that

instead of hinging my self-worth on dieting, I'll hinge it on pregnancy and (f) that my life will be a waste.

In other words, the small stuff.

A friend recently shared with me that, in her experience, control wasn't what got her pregnant. But surrender was -- surrender to what happens (or doesn't), surrender to bodily wisdom and if/when she gets pregnant (even though, goodness, the *if* sometimes feels very scary), **surrender to the fact that however a child comes into her life, it will be beautiful.**

And that's when it hit me: I got this. Completely.

And that's when it hit me: I got this. Completely.

Because yoga has taught me this skill -- to connect with my body, drop into the rhythm of my own breath and then both allow and receive. After having yoga as my constant companion on this long (still unfolding) journey to love my body, I know it's got my back on this, too.

That doesn't necessarily mean I'll get pregnant. **But it does mean I can lean into the process.**

Because that's the other funny thing. Back when my husband and I got married, we said things like "If we ever have kids, like when we're 50, we'll adopt. There are plenty of children who need a loving home."

Gawd; the me of 6+ years ago was such a know-it-all, wasn't she?



But dangit if she wasn't right sometimes. Because for me, that really is true. What my husband and I are ready to do is parent -- **love a child and help them grow up the best we're able.** The result we're looking for is a child, not a birth.

But sometimes birth doesn't look like what you expected.

Same as with my marriage (now child-ready) or my body (no longer in need of a call home from the truant officer).



Anna Guest-Jelley, RYT 500, is the Founder of [Curvy Yoga](#), where she writes and teaches about yoga and embodiment as the foundations of a life well-lived (and body well-loved). She is also the Editor of this book you're reading. Connect with her on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



Loving My Body

by Sheryl Hagenstein

Loving my body has never come easy. It has been/is work for me. There was even a period of time where the battle of me versus my body consumed almost every moment of my life, including my sleep.

I would wake in the night and find myself in what felt like a physical fight with the stories in my head that were like a black slimy blob trying to take over what light I had inside of me. The black slimy blob made up tapes of all the negative things I had ever heard or been told. They would replay over and over while I punished myself for failing to maintain a disordered eating pattern, for having a large body, for not being beautiful, for breathing, for not being at the gym for 3 hours instead of 2, for being.

The Shift

I remember in one of my first yoga classes, my teacher came over to me in a twist and said "you are quite flexible in your spine here; do you mind if I assist you?" I nodded. Someone (other than my partner) was touching my body in a respectful way, and they had just said something positive about it. WHOA! Like WHOA!

This was an absolutely mind blowing moment for me.

The mind blowing moments continued, like the first time I allowed my belly to expand while breathing. I let it puff out like a balloon: my hands on my belly, feeling this action, my breath had never been so deep. I was so involved with this breath I forgot that my hands were touching my belly, my big fat belly.

For the majority of my life, I had found a way to breathe so that I would suck in my belly while inhaling and suck in more while exhaling. To discover that this was not the way our bodies were meant to breathe, but rather that my belly was SUPPOSED to expand as it filled with breath and fall with my exhale (that this was the actual science behind the way my body was supposed to operate and, in fact, the way all bodies operate) just seemed surreal and somehow so very deeply satisfying.

It finally felt right.

Through a regular practice and implementing my teachers' suggestions of letting go of the things I no longer need, the tapes that play in my mind, and my belief in these tapes, **my body has become something I can appreciate -- regularly.**

The very yogic approach that a regular practice will eventually allow those things that are not authentically me to fall away became a reality. **Today I am able to make observations about my body without judging it.** I am able to hear my teachers' instructions without hearing judgment in their words. I am able to modify or change a pose slightly so that it feels right in my body. My body has become something that I can paint and draw on a canvas. I can see it as something beautiful, strong, soft, determined, sensitive, and so many more things. Mostly, I can see it as mine, and as something that needs to be honored, nurtured and respected.

Yoga Off the Mat



After I'd been practicing yoga for a while, I was pushing the bathroom door open one day. I felt my entire hand on the door; the energy traveled up my arm and effortlessly the door opened. I was so present in my body at that moment that to this day, whenever I push that door open, I am instantly present in my body. It may seem like a silly example, but it is one that illustrates how yoga has come off the mat and found its way into my daily life.

Not only have the physical benefits come into my daily life, but the deeper, more spiritual benefits have as well -- like the ability to connect with my breath and find peace in a difficult moment or not feel angry when really I am sad or hurt.

The most notable benefit is my ability to not be afraid to let my little light shine big -- living my yoga both on and off the mat.

When I first started doing yoga in my city, it felt like I was the first fat girl to ever do yoga.

Challenges in Yoga

Yoga has come with some challenges; however, I didn't find any of them too difficult or overwhelming. When I first started doing yoga in my city, it felt like I was the first fat girl to ever do yoga. Luckily, I found a great studio that within a few weeks of me being there stocked their bookshelf with *MegaYoga*. The teachers had read the book so that they could offer me modifications if needed. With the guidance of the amazing teachers at this little studio, I quickly grew in my practice.

The biggest challenge for me was the clothes. For the first quadrillion years of my practice, I wore big baggy t-shirts and yoga pants. I found this extremely awkward. I always had to pause to pull down my shirt; I

didn't realize just how tiresome this was until the day I wore a tank top. This was probably one of the most liberating things I did for myself in yoga and life!

My teacher high fived me as I walked in (knowing my issues by this point), and I had a practice in which I could completely focus on my movement and breath and not on my shirt falling over my head in Down Dog!

The Final Word

I feel emotional now as I write this little story of mine. Yoga has helped me come so far, and I cry because this battle has been so real for so very long. **Although I still have times when I have a bad body image day, the good body image days outweigh the bad and that black blob of negativity and hate doesn't visit me any longer.** I know that this is only because of the work that I have done with counseling and yoga.

For so long, I was convinced that my body was an outcast; I couldn't imagine that it (my body) did anything that "normal" bodies were supposed to do. And yet, through yoga, I continue to discover that my body does exactly what it is supposed to do every single day.

It moves; it carries me in my own grace through the day or from pose to pose. It carries life to each of my limbs and all of my fingers and toes and back to my heart. It signals me when it needs nourishment and when it needs sleep. It is strong and allows me to practice the physical poses I enjoy. **It is soft and allows me to hug people completely -- with all of the love that I feel for them.** It laughs; it cries; it is happy; it is sad; it is mad.

My body does all of this and more.

In my practice, I am often drawn to the more challenging postures or styles of yoga -- the ones that cause me to sweat or exert muscular



energy. But the greater benefits of yoga are the internal one found in any posture that I can do with ease and in sync with my breath -- when I can find gentleness and kindness towards myself in any pose. **This gentleness allows my heart to open and my mind to be free, and this openness and joy than carry over into my life and off of the mat.**

Namaste.



Sheryl Hagenstein is a 200h certified yoga teacher who is passionate in her desire to bring yoga to those who don't feel they are the right shape or size for yoga. She is a volunteer at the Women's Health Clinic in the Weight Preoccupation Community Education Program and a Yoga teacher for the Provincial Eating Disorders Prevention and Recovery Program. She believes that we can all strive to be healthy at whatever size we are and that yoga is a great connector for the mind to the body. This connection allows us to develop an awareness which helps us to achieve a deeper appreciation for our bodies as they are; to learn to be more mindful in our daily lives. Diving deeper into our understanding of self and recognizing the beauty and strength in absolutely everybody. Connect with her on [her website](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



Living Inside My Body

by Jane House

I find it a wee bit humorous that I am contributing my body story to "Curvy Yoga" because the truth about me is that I am totally on the beanpole side of things. From an outside perspective, I have always been seen (physically at least!) as very status quo. If I want, I can fit the bill at Lululemon. In fact, I have been their poster-girl for a time.

But from the inside, it's a much more complicated story.

From as far back as I can remember, I felt as though my body was speaking a silent foreign language that I was

determined to understand. Even if it would take a lifetime of exploration, I was hell-bent on listening to those internal murmurings that have always seemed equal parts beauty and terror.

When I was young and could not make sense of my world on my own, my body began to tell a story. It spoke in symptoms that I would later work on decoding. When my parents divorced (when I was five years old), for example, I had no real ability to speak up, cry, get angry, get sad.

Instead, my body took on a juvenile form of arthritis. Arthritis is a flaring-up of the joints that really makes no rational sense in the body of an otherwise healthy child. In my case, the ankles and later the knees were red-hot and angry on

The practice of yoga felt like love to me—the kind of love that is necessary to know before reaching beyond.

the inside. **Maybe they weren't quite sure how to move forward in a world that was making less and less sense.** One night, thank god, I had the opportunity to authentically express just how angry and sad I was.

In short, my good-girl body Let It Rip. In front of my father I screamed, kicked, beat the daylights out of the bed. The next day, my symptoms were gone.

My solar plexus felt free.

Years and years later, I returned home on a break from my studies at college. I was frustrated at school and didn't quite know which direction to take. At the time, I had been running long distances every day. **Running away from something? Running toward something?** I wasn't sure. I was confused.

I remember sitting at the kitchen table with my father. My elbows were on the table, hands pulling on my hair. I was on the verge of tears. "What is it that you WANT, Jane?" he asked. He asked the question over and over again.

Then, there was a great silence. It might have been the very first, true silence of my entire life. I really wanted to answer this question honestly. I searched my soul.

What I came up with was, "What I want...is to feel like I am living inside my body." And, with that, a straight-up confession that 'til that moment, I had not been.

I started taking yoga classes soon after that.



From my very first class, taught by a swami in the nether-regions of the Georgetown University gymnasium, I was alive. **I loved every minute of the quiet-alertness, the self-inquiry, the searing hamstrings.** I finally felt like I was gaining the means to listen to my body and to hear the messages it was sending up. The practice of yoga felt like love to me-- the kind of love that is necessary to know before reaching beyond.

Over the years, I have committed my body to the great teachers who have thankfully shown up in my life. Through the consistency of the work in yoga, I can feel how my body has folded into a lineage that feels like home to my very bones.

Things come up. I breathe through them. My solar plexus is free.



Jane House has developed a teaching style that she often calls 'The Yoga of Embodiment,' a practice that weaves the breath-based flow of Vinyasa Yoga and the precision of Iyengar Yoga to yield a deep, physically challenging and transformative mind/body experience aimed toward the process of self- inquiry and beingness. In Jane's classes, students learn to inhabit their bodies in warmer, more creative and more spacious ways. Jane has been primarily influenced by master teachers Patricia Walden, Barbara Benagh, Rodney Yee, Angela Farmer, Tony Briggs, and Sofia Diaz. Jane is the co-founder of The Yoga Loft in San Francisco (2002) www.theloftsf.com, where she spent the last 8 years serving and teaching among a thriving yoga community. Jane holds an M.A. in Counseling Psychology and is a graduate of The Yoga Loft's 500-hour Teacher Training program. Visit her online at www.janehouseyoga.com.



Getting Back on the Mat

by Maggie Juliano

When I first heard about this eBook, I had two thoughts: "Great! I've been working on that" and "Boy, do I need to read that." And then I spent weeks thinking about how I couldn't get started writing this because I haven't gotten back into a regular yoga practice and I still wasn't "there" yet in terms of finding peace with my body.

I thought that because I was still struggling, I wouldn't have anything of worth to offer anyone in terms of how yoga can build a healthy body image & body esteem.

I think of this often in terms of the nonprofit I started, Sprout Yoga (which is dedicated to helping those who are healing from eating disorders). Much of the time, I think people imagine that I used yoga to get a better body image and heal from disordered eating so I must now be done with that struggle. I worry that if people learned that I still struggle, they'd discount the important message of Sprout Yoga -- **that everyone, everywhere deserves to feel at ease with themselves and their bodies.**

And I firmly believe that -- you have the RIGHT to feel at ease in your body. Alive in your skin. Good enough, perfect as you are right now. Right here. Not in 5 or 15 or 50 pounds, but right now.

And I can tell you there are plenty of times I get jealous or envious of women who are larger than me for a million reasons. I might be jealous of how they find things to wear that are

fantastic, classy and on trend, but I can't find a pair of pants that fit. I might be jealous of a sassy walk complete with a great tush. So it is true that **where ever you are right now, there is something really awesome about your body.** Something worth celebrating, worth valuing, worthy of esteem.

My struggle with my body image is considerably easier than it used to be before I dug deep into yoga. And I now have this tool when the struggle intensifies.

Awesome. So how does this relate to why I couldn't get myself to write this article?

Because **I think that if I tell you I still struggle, some days mightily, with my own body esteem, you will write off anything that I have to say about how yoga helps.** But I'll tell you, on the whole, my struggle with my body image is considerably easier than it used to be before I dug deep into yoga.

And I now have this tool when the struggle intensifies.

There are times when it's really hard to get back on the yoga mat because I can't get myself to deal with feeling my body. The thought process goes like this: if I feel my body, I will feel how huge I must be. So if I can avoid feeling my body, feeling where my thighs are and what's going on with my belly, then I can escape from negative feelings about my body.

It's like thinking that you can heal a crappy self-esteem by ignoring anything that makes you



reflect on yourself, and even more so, trying to be someone else.

So how do you get yourself onto the yoga mat on those days when you feel like crap about yourself? Here's a few things I do that really help. First, stop thinking of yoga as exercise.

Yes, doing yoga can give you great arms or fabulous calves. But if you want to get on the mat to end the war with yourself about why your body doesn't live up to your expectations, you have to let go of thinking that the purpose of getting on the mat is to improve your abs or tush or belly.

Get on the mat because it feels good. Get on the mat because you deserve a few moments out of the day to take care of yourself.

I find that if I get exercise in other forms -- walking the dog, swimming, hitting the bike, etc. -- I get onto my mat more easily and it gets me farther in terms of how I can connect with my body.

I also give myself a break more -- I drop into Child's pose from Downward Dog more often, and in those moments of surrender I find I get to places in my head that I need to get to. **I give myself a break on something else that happened that day or week.** I forgive myself for a mistake or sharp word and find my way into apologies that had been held back.

All because I let myself surrender into that pose. And it's easier to get to that place when I really allow my body to guide me, rather than deciding that a good yoga practice must have 3 Sun Salutations A and three Sun Salutations B.

I also find that if I stop thinking I have to do yoga every day, or for 30 minutes every day, that I can get on to the mat with more regularity.

Yoga works if you do it, but if it's one more thing you have to beat yourself up about then you will stop doing it. So let go. Let go of making your practice perfect, and let it be mindful. Let it be what your body needs.

This is true for thinking that you have to do a certain series or specific set of asana for your practice to be "real." It's real if you get connected with your breath. **It's real if you feel better after doing it.** It's real if it makes it easier for you to meditate and be mindful after you are done with it.

Finally, I find sometimes that the basics of my life interfere with getting my practice on, which then makes me think that there are things I should do instead of taking care of myself. That I don't really need to take care of myself, that my body esteem is not really as important as I sometimes think.

When home is not so sweet, or silent, head to class. Any good yoga teacher will give you the space, physically and emotionally, to follow the class or drop into a restorative pose. I promise. In fact, there is a studio I go to (frequented by the yoga mommas - the ones who drive their Lexuses to the studio wearing \$100 pants) where every teacher who sees a student take a break from a pose celebrates it and recommends it to the rest of the class.



Maggie Juliano is the Founder of [Sprout Yoga](#), a nonprofit organization dedicated to helping those who are healing from eating disorders. She is a certified yoga teacher with specialized training in trauma. She founded Sprout Yoga because she saw a need for yoga for anyone of any size, shape or color. She teaches private and donation based classes, and she also develops yoga programs for other nonprofit service organizations. Maggie recently travelled to Haiti as part of Yoga4Trauma to teach Haitian school children. Maggie is also the author of the forthcoming book "Compassionate Body: Using Yoga to Create a Positive Body Image." As Executive Director, Maggie speaks publicly about yoga and eating disorder and has been interviewed for several blogs, magazines and books. Connect with Maggie and Sprout Yoga [on Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



Feminism, Body Image and Yoga

by Melanie Klein

It was in an afternoon yoga class 10 years ago that I realized my relationship with my body had been profoundly changed.

Gazing up at my legs, glistening with sweat in Shoulder-stand, I realized that **I wasn't searching for signs of "imperfection"** or scrutinizing my body with the negative self-talk that too many of us have with ourselves on a daily basis—the abusive dialogue I had with myself most of my life.

For the first time I could remember since early childhood, I wasn't critical of myself.

I wasn't looking for parts of my body to control and change.

A distorted body image, self-criticism and the pursuit of "perfection" by any means necessary is a perverse inheritance passed down from the women in my family and influenced by the unrealistic and prolific images manufactured by the larger media culture. Given this environment, I never had a chance to emerge unscathed, self-esteem intact.

The women in my family were constantly dieting, tracking calories in food diaries, lamenting weight gain, celebrating weight loss and sizing other women up. An unhealthy pre-occupation with my body and food was set in motion before I hit puberty and

manifested in all sorts of dangerous methods to obtain thinness: diet pills, colon hydrotherapy, fasting, legal and illegal stimulants, calorie restriction, self-induced vomiting and excessive exercise.

The routes to freedom presented themselves at about the same time, feminism and then yoga. Feminism offered the ideological tools to examine my tortured relationship with my body systematically and deconstruct media images. Yoga provided the practice that rooted the things feminism had taught me.

It is one thing to intellectualize self-love and acceptance; **it's another to embody it.**

Healing my relationship with my body took years of practice, years that were recognized that moment in Shoulder-stand. That moment, absent of shame, guilt and disappointment, signaled how far I had come since I had stepped on the mat for the first time in 1996. I began practicing weekly and when I met "my" first teacher, Caleb Asch, I returned day after day, eventually canceling my gym membership and practicing with him five to six days per week for years.

I didn't return day after day with the same intentions I had for working out at the gym daily, to beat my body into submission. **I returned because I couldn't get enough of the way**

Yoga provided the practice that rooted the things feminism had taught me.

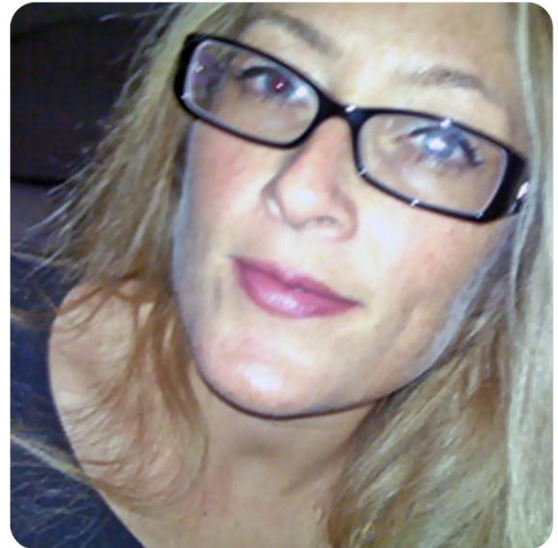


yoga left me feeling. Each breath allowed me to rekindle my relationship with my body, to return home fully. Returning to the mat daily, through times of sadness, heaviness, and abundance, I was able to reconnect with my body, to heal the mind/body split, to listen to my body and respect its boundaries.

Feminism and yoga raised my consciousness and led me back to myself, in love. I attribute these two complimentary systems for suturing the emotional and physical wounds and saving my life.

For this, I am profoundly grateful.

** This piece originally appeared in [Elephant Journal](#)*



Melanie Klein is an Associate Faculty member at Santa Monica College, teaching Sociology and Women's Studies. She has worked with the new citizen journalists of the LA Academy of Global Girl Media and the peer-educators of J.A.D.E (Joint Advocates on Disordered Eating) on ways to tap into the power of their own voice. She is an expert contributor in the areas of media literacy and body image issues for Proud2Bme, a newly launched NEDA project . She is also the adviser of the Santa Monica College Leadership Alliance and the founder and co-coordinator of WAM! Los Angeles. She is featured in the forthcoming book, *21st Century Yoga* and the documentary, *The American Housewife*.

Melanie is also the Founder of [Feminist Fatale](#), which sprang from her conversations inside and outside the classrooms as a larger platform for these observations, insights and comments on the cultural landscape. Her work may also be found at Adios Barbie , Elephant Journal , and WIMN's Voices . Connect with Feminist Fatale on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



Yoga as My 40-Year Companion

by Abby Lentz

As I start to write about my journey into yoga, I am reminded that **March 2012 marks the 40th year since I began my yoga practice.** My son had just been born, and with the help of my mother-in-law, I went to the YMCA's Mother's-Day-Out.

Hard to believe, but back in 1972 daycare wasn't an industry yet. This program was for moms who could find babysitting so they could come to the Y and do activities together, instead of leaving your child at the Y for them to do fun things with other kids. **At 24, it was the first time I had ever heard the word "yoga," let alone done any poses or breathwork.**

I linger on this to try and give some perspective to what coming into yoga was like all those decades ago, especially in a small town like Charleston, West Virginia. There were no DVDs, internet or online instruction. Even VCRs were in infancy -- trying to decide on Betamax or VHS. Not until the end of the decade would simple video recorders be mass marketed in the US. You watched it live, or you missed it.

All instruction was either in person, in books or, as my good fortune would have it, on PBS with Lillas Folan.

Arranging naptime so I would be free when her show was on TV in the afternoon, I became hooked on yoga. When the station played her show again late at night, I was there doing the session a second time. **I discovered I could put yoga into my day, including standing on my head while Johnny Carson gave his monologue.**

I also found a few books to work with, my favorite being the small paperback *Lillas Yoga and You*. Many years later when I met Lillas, it was pure joy to have her autograph my copy. She would later become my mentor and advisor as I named my yoga teaching practice HeavyWeight Yoga.

Over the years, as with many things, yoga flowed in and out of my life. When I became a mother for the second time, everything became twice as hectic. Then a move to Austin, Texas, shifted my awareness. A year later at 30 I would become a student-older-than-average at the University of Texas. After my father's death, I became caretaker to my younger brother and sister. **Managing a household with 4 kids, a job, school and a husband, it seemed like there was little time for yoga on the mat.**

The years rolled on -- as did the pounds. Divorce and jobs came and went along with celebrations and a new love, but always there was yoga. By the end of 2002, it became clear that my job in publishing was evaporating. In the back of my mind I had always toyed with the idea of becoming a yoga teacher, but I was sure that I'd have to lose weight along with saving money for the training.

Before either could happen, though, the Universe sent me an opportunity I couldn't refuse. In 2003, my Austin yoga teacher asked me to take over her ongoing yoga business while she went on sabbatical. The catch was that I had to be Kripalu trained and ready by June 2004.



I went off to Kripalu to do what was then their 3x9 teacher training, a series of three 9-day sessions over a 6-month period. I arrived the largest person in my class with my credit cards bulging. It was then that my teacher training combined with my years of practice to become the seed for HeavyWeight Yoga.

With each pose I had to modify for my body, I asked a single question: "What is the benefit of this pose?" From there, I worked with my own body until I was sure the benefit was being received. I stopped seeing how a pose looked on the outside with my flesh and instead focused on how it felt and the alignment of my frame.

Before completing my teacher training, however, I was given the news that my prospective partner had fallen in love and would not be leaving Austin as planned. There would be no business for me to inherit.

Over that summer, I taught several traditional Kripalu classes, but I continued to nourish the seed of HeavyWeight Yoga. Friends came to do yoga at my home. With them, I received honest feedback to my modifications and use of props, perfecting not only the moves, but the language I would need to translate poses for the bigger-bodied student.

By November I felt ready and took out a 3-line ad in Austin's healthy lifestyle magazine offering the first HeavyWeight Yoga class. Only 2 people came, but it was a start. Undaunted, I pressed on -- having been taught at Kripalu that **every class is perfect, even if no student appears.** My doctor offered her reception room so I could

add another class. It turned out that one of my students worked at the local newspaper and was friends with the fitness reporter. By February, there was an article about HeavyWeight Yoga, and the phone rang off the hook.

Since then, I've been blessed with gifted people to get out my message that everyone can do yoga regardless of size or circumstance. Preparing for the first national coverage of HeavyWeight Yoga, I produced my first DVD, *Yoga for the Body You Have Today*. I wanted to ensure that their readers would have a way to practice. Unfortunately, the article didn't mention my DVD or even how to get in touch with me. And thus my mission to change the image of yoga was born.

Based on the celebration of a lone photo of me, a large woman, doing yoga in a national publication, I was pointed in the direction of my second DVD, *Change the Image of Yoga*. Featuring 8 of my students on the mat and in interviews, I wanted everyone to see what I see every class – beautiful bodies of all sizes doing yoga. My hope continues to be that people will identify with one of my students and really get the message that they, too, can do yoga with the life and the body they have today.

Working with people of all shapes and sizes, I have come to realize that while the practice of formal asana is wonderful, it's only one path to yoga. If you are bed bound or bound by your body, you still can do yoga. Breathing deeply, taking whatever movement you have and moving with intent, with focus, with desire – it all becomes yoga. It's not about being able to stand on your head or even stand in Tadasana. It's about the energy and efforts that you use with whatever range of motion you have on any given day.



Looking back over these years, what I have come to learn is that once yoga is in your life, it never leaves you. I think of yoga as my invisible life-net. It's always with me to clear my mind, calm me to my bones – relaxing my body and thoughts even under immense stress. Without my thinking about it, gentle breathing and physical relaxation just washes over me whenever they are needed.

Once you give someone yoga, it will be with them forever.



Abby Lentz is the Founder of [HeavyWeight Yoga](#)[®]. She is a certified yoga teacher through Kripalu as well as Relax & Renew[®]. In addition to yoga, Abby is also an avid bicyclist and triathlete. Connect with her on [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



Downward Shaking Dog

by Helen Lehndorf

I long held the belief about myself that I was allergic to exercise. I enjoyed walking, especially if it was functional walking (getting me from A to B or up a hill), but other than that, I am the least sporty person I know. **Hell, I am so physically inept I managed to sprain my ankle in a meditation class!** Nerdy, bespectacled and curvy – high school Physical Education classes were such an ordeal for me that I used to skip that hour of school to avoid it, hiding in the toilets with a book or simply running away from school for an hour.

Yoga changed all that.

Now I go to three yoga classes a week, practice at home frequently and would love to do more if my busy life allowed it. I am booked into a two day yoga retreat this Easter, and I am excited at the idea of two days full of physical exertion and concentration. I even wish it was longer!

I am also training to become a 'plus-sized' yoga teacher because I want to share with others the wonderful things I have gained from yoga. **For a long time, although I held a secret desire to become a yoga teacher, I thought it would be an impossibility for me because of my body.** Now, however, there is a growing movement of 'plus-sized' yoginis, leading the way for the rest of us, like Anna! I now see I can teach yoga and have a lot to offer.

I've been doing yoga for twelve years – I started just before having my oldest son, although there were years in there where my practice was sporadic, where I could go a month without making it to class. It's only in the last three years

that I have had a regular, focused practice. My first yoga teacher was a dancer who taught on the side for cash and was certainly not much of a yogi in the usual sense. He was flirty and potty-mouthed and would frequently turn up to class late, scarfing a meat pie and drinking a take-away coffee while he yelled at us to start sun-saluting to warm up.

I loved his classes, though, because he was demanding and hilarious. I've had many different yoga teachers since, from many different styles of yoga, and they have all taught me something and shown me different facets of the yoga life.

Here's where I want to be really honest with you about two things; **this isn't an 'infomercial'-like story of overnight transformation.** When I first started yoga, I disliked about 80% of the classes. My arms shook and burned in Downward Dog.

I found it hard to breathe through my straining, and when the yoga teachers would say Downward Dog was a 'resting pose,' I would have to resist the urge to walk up front and bop them one.

Poses which opened my hips hurt, and the next day I often had significant pain in my hips. I was not flexible and could only just reach my toes. I was struggling so much to follow the instructions and not make a fool of myself, I frequently forgot to breathe and couldn't imagine how people could breathe in line with the postures, much less with any grace.



I felt self-conscious and a bit of a mess. **I felt like everyone else in the class could see that I 'couldn't really do yoga.'**

Two things kept me turning up to those early classes. One was that I was in love with yoga as a concept, if not a reality. **I wanted to BE a yogini**; I wanted to really feel it the way I could see my seasoned yogini friends did. At the most facile, shallow level, I liked saying I was going to yoga or had just been.

The other thing that kept me turning up to yoga was Savasana, or relaxation – that blissful final 10–15 minutes where the teacher talked us down to the floor, where we would lie in corpse pose for an always-too-short period of rest and restoration. **Nothing else, not sleep, not chocolate, not a hot bath, rested and rejuvenated me like those fifteen delicious resting moments at the end of class.**

But after a few years, (yes, sorry, years) as I grew stronger and more familiar with the postures and what they were about, I began to enjoy yoga more and more and actually achieved the 'yoga high' I had previously thought was a myth invented by yoga teachers to keep people coming to class!

Here's the other thing which goes counter to most traditional 'yoga changed my life' stories: **in the twelve years since I began yoga, I have not lost weight** – in fact, I have steadily gained weight over that decade and am currently at the highest weight I have ever been. Two pregnancies, eight years of intensive at-home parenting, a challenging day-job which I did from home around the demands of the kids, plus a prolonged and very stressful period of having my youngest son at first fail to meet some key developmental goals and finally be diagnosed

with autism, all contributed to my weight steadily crawling up and up.

Some people have the physiology of losing weight under times of stress, some gain it. I'm a gainer. It was a hell of a decade, and I'm happy to have come through the worst of it with my sanity intact!

However, while my body is not thin, it is strong. **I can't fit into anything I wore before I had babies, but I can feel my strong abdominal muscles hold me in Boat pose, a pose I**

couldn't remotely do when I was twenty kilos lighter. I can hold my heavy body just above the floor in crocodile, a pose which used to see me splatting on the floor before I got near a hold. Yoga has made me strong.

Yoga has given me an entirely different relationship with my body, where I judge it by what it can do, rather than its shape.

Yoga has given me an entirely different relationship with my body, where I judge it by what it can do, rather than its shape.

Am I now at peace with my body? No. **I would be lying to you if I said I don't still struggle with my body image, or never have times of wishing I were thinner.** I don't know a woman alive, fat, thin or in between, who is at 100% at peace with her body. Such is the way of the modern world – we are trained to dislike ourselves, by capitalism, by our patriarchal society, by our families who don't know any better.

But I am more at peace with my body than I was.

The spaces between the bouts of self-doubt and self-hate are getting longer, and when I find myself in a spiral of self-loathing, I know getting onto the mat will help soothe me and



get my priorities straight again. After a childhood and early adulthood of being pretty much entirely 'in my head' and almost afraid of my body and it's needs, I inhabit my body more fully now than I ever have, and I love what my hours on the mat have taught me--and continue to teach me. I'm so glad I hung in there, through the early years of arm-shake and self-consciousness.

I hope this story might encourage you to hang in there, too.



Helen Lehndorf is a writer, yoga-addict and arts administrator who lives in Palmerston North, New Zealand. Her first book, a volume of poetry, 'The Comforter' was released last year. She is training to be a plus-sized yoga teacher with Natasha Allan of Zing Studio, Palmerston North. You can read her blog at: <http://www.helenlehndorf.com>



Developing Self-Awareness Through Yoga

by Adan Lerma

For me, writing about, and revealing, something about oneself is similar to showing up for a fitness or yoga class.

There's lots to look forward to, anticipate and be glad that I am doing. Even enjoy doing. But there's an exposure risk. **Others will see how well, and not-so-well, I do.**

Some people will like what I do or say, no matter what; god bless them. However, others may nitpick, even if with good intentions (yes, even I do that sometimes).

I had this experience of being aware of both approval and disapproval from a young age.

Born and raised in Texas, I learned English when I started kindergarten. I was acutely aware of how what I said or did brought out giggles, frowns or smiles in others.

My tiny sincere desire to "do right" didn't always factor into whether someone approved or acknowledged my efforts, though.

I didn't understand that.

Most of the time, though I have a small handle on that now, I still don't understand it. Where does the meanness and lack of empathy from others come from? Why does it persist? What's the reward?

Unfortunately, we often have the same negative attitude within ourselves. Or, at least, I did. And didn't realize it then. I wasn't aware of that. This is what I think yoga has helped me most with: awareness.

It's taught me that awareness is something we always have with us. That we are already aware of much. And that the new thing we're learning is simply becoming aware of our awareness.

As always, I believe this is a process. Thank goodness.



Felipe Adan Lerma was born and raised in Texas. He is now a young senior living in Vermont, his wife Sheila's home state. He brings a gentle infusion of yoga and fitness to bear on his lifelong interests in writing, painting, dance, photography and the arts.

Determined to learn about the ideas of Western Culture that have informed our civilization, Adan put himself through college with the help of his GI Bill benefits. More recently, he has added certifications in fitness and yoga. His self-stated mission [on his website](#) reads, "a Beginner's View: Integrating Yoga Fitness and the Arts." Connect with him [on Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



Fed

by Rachel Mack

I spent four years in graduate school, learning to be a writer. Then and now, I'd say that those were good years. The tight community led to cherished friendships; I met many writers I'd previously admired from afar; I got to experience living in a new part of the country, and there were parties all the time. In short, it was fun.

I loved being part of that community, and I'm still happy to be part of it as an alumnae. At the time, my happy affiliation with the group was a stand-in for my own identity. I was young and unsure of myself. **I was a little bit lost, but I'd found a good place to be lost.**

The painful awkwardness I felt in my own body was easy to shut off or run away from if I went out for a few drinks with friends on the front porch of our favorite pub. The next day, hung over, I'd heat up a frozen pizza and munch on it throughout the day. Cut off from myself, I let physical activity become a distant memory, even though I'd been a devoted lap swimmer through my teenage and college years.

Two years in, I went for one of my infrequent swims and stepped on the big scale in the locker room. I'd gained about fifty pounds in two years. I realized that all the "fun" I'd been having was not good for me—in fact, it was abuse. I was only twenty-six. Twenty-five plus twenty-five plus twenty-five...when would it stop? I couldn't let genetics or the unkind words of

others or my own fear of vulnerability be an excuse for mistreating myself.

I started small—with yoga at the student rec center twice a week and more frequent visits to the pool. It wasn't a scientific plan, but it was what I could do. I knew my vision of what was good and necessary to eat had become completely warped. I saw a nutritionist and she showed me what healthy eating looked like. I followed her plan meticulously for five months.

These three things together—small things—led to a shift.

My body showed me
again how
remarkable it is—
what it can carry me
through and how
strong it can be.

Yoga taught me to pay attention. As my body awareness increased, I began to notice what foods made me feel light and energetic and which ones (and what quantities) made me feel sluggish and heavy. I saw what effect action and lack of action had on my body and my spirit. I

could tell when I woke up in the morning whether or not I'd been kind to my body the day before. That feeling became my addiction. I grew stronger, steadier, more flexible.

Eventually, I stopped following the nutritionist's plan to the letter. **I'd changed my priorities.**

At first, the numbers on the scale motivated me. I'd seen a grandmother struggle through dialysis and die from type II diabetes complications, and I was scared of what would become of me if I didn't change my path. Through the process, I became motivated by gratitude to my body.



Look at all I'd put it through! But it still worked. It was made to move. It deserved healthy fuel.

From then on, my goal was not to lose weight. It was to treat my body with kindness and gratitude. Sometimes treating my body well leads to a little bit of weight loss. Other times it doesn't. Sometimes I fail and don't treat my body well at all. But my yoga practice taught me that I can start small. When I mess up, I know I can step back on that path as soon as I'm ready.

Last year, I lost a grandparent in January and a parent in February. For almost four years, I'd run myself ragged trying to save my mom's life, and in her last months, I ran past my limit more than once. **Often, the only yoga I had time for was some deep breathing before I got out of bed in the morning.** I ate whatever food well-meaning friends and relatives dropped at our house, whether it was healthy fuel or not.

In grief, I felt weak and off-kilter. As I practiced yoga, my insides wobbled and shook with sadness. I did not feel strong. I did not feel powerful. Still, my teachers complimented me on my strong practice. I went to simple classes, hoping just to maintain my strength. *!!! work on yoga when I'm feeling better*, I thought. I was in no danger of striving. **My only goal was to muddle through and feel somewhat like myself when I came out of my haze.**

A strange thing happened: my body got stronger. In April, I went to a yoga class where the teacher taught us to walk into Handstands. I had been through teacher training without doing a Handstand on my own and hadn't attempted it at all in about eight months.

And there, that day, I did it. No "working on it," no stressing over it.

A couple months later, a teacher suggested lifting one leg in Urdvha Dhanurasana. Again, I did it. Something I had never been able to do and wasn't particularly worried about achieving.

In September, I went to a workshop with a visiting teacher. Standing at the front of my mat, I bent back, looking for the mat behind me, waiting for him to spot me on a drop back. He had his hands on the hips of the woman next to me, pulling her up. "Pop your heels," he said. "You're there." I looked behind me, popped my heels, and there I was, in a full backbend, hands firm on the mat.

In the years of my Mom's illness, it was not easy to be good to myself. My body showed me again how remarkable it is—what it can carry me through and how strong it can be. I love it, I'm grateful to it, I'm sorry for all the abuse I put it through. I know who I am now—no need to let my identity be subsumed by a group. I know that when I step on the mat, I make the first step toward treating myself with love.

When I step on the mat, I'm fed.



Rachel Mack began her yoga practice in 2005, when she was an MFA student in Creative Writing at the University of Alabama. She completed 200-hour teacher training with YogaWorks in 2010. She teaches writing workshops and yoga at [Shine](#) in Louisville, KY. She is planning (and taking suggestions for) a yoga-centric summer road trip across America, which she'll cover at her blog, [Yoga Adventurer](#).



Finding Home

by Miri McDonald

Growing up, I was chubby. This one word—chubby—had so many effects on how I was perceived and, more importantly, how I saw myself as a young girl. And sometimes, it still impacts how I see myself today.

Overall, it limited my enjoyment of childhood. **It also meant I grew up defining myself in that way, no matter how my shape may have changed over time.** It also impacted the way I interacted with boys. I placed too much importance on their validation of me instead of finding it within myself.

Like many Jersey girls in the 1980s, step aerobics unearthed the active person inside of me. But the 360 degree mirrors inside the gym kept that chubby girl in her place.

Looking in those mirrors, I heard a running dialogue full of negative messages about myself.

Fast forward to my post-college years. I lived in an apartment building that had a yoga studio on the top floor. I was curious about that studio for a long time before I stepped inside. Ironically, the first time I tried yoga was in my gym. Something inside me knew it wasn't quite the same as a studio, but I wasn't sure how it would be different. I also wanted to learn the right way to do the poses and the real names for them, too.

The first time I walked into the studio, the first thing I noticed was the lack of mirrors. I also noticed that the people came in all shapes and sizes. Then, during class I noticed **everyone**

was so focused on their poses, they could care less about looking at anyone else.

Of course, being a total newbie, I was lost, but I also never felt more at home.

I continued to take classes and felt a new high. The high that came from appreciating what my body **COULD** do versus what it couldn't, what I **LOVED** about my body versus what I didn't, and what it felt like to have a positive soundtrack in my head versus the negative chatter.

The other invaluable thing that yoga has brought me over time is the attitude to try all poses, even if I fall.

I started telling myself that I **AM** the kind of person that could do a Handstand.

For a long time, even though I felt great being in yoga class, I looked at certain poses, mostly inversions and arm balances and thought, "You can't do that. You aren't a Handstand person." This fear and limited thinking kept me out of those poses.

Then I got certified to teach yoga and said to myself, "How can you be true to yourself as a teacher and have these thoughts? How can you help people find themselves through yoga if you limit your own practice?"

So I started telling myself that I **AM** the kind of person that could do a Handstand. I just needed to practice. And while I was at it, I told myself I



could do Crow, too. And guess what? One day, while working against the wall, I did it!

I became a person that CAN do a Handstand.

I still haven't done one away from the wall, but that doesn't mean I'm not trying! Crow, well, let's just say I can do it for about a millisecond and then I fall on my head and laugh. **And then I try again.**

Because when I am honest about what yoga means for me and how it's helped me be more at peace with my body, achieving a specific advanced pose is amazing—but the continued practice is where the real work and the lessons of self-acceptance happen.



Miri McDonald lives and practices yoga in Madison, WI. She enjoys the Vinyasa style because she enjoys the active quality of linking breath with movement and the ability to develop creative yoga sequences. Miri feels the most important reason she learned to teach yoga is the same reason she herself practices yoga -- to help people understand and appreciate their bodies.

Miri earned her Yoga Alliance 200-hour certification from Tranquil Space Yoga in Washington, DC. She has also participated in classes and workshops with well-known teachers in the field including Seane Corn, Ana Forrest, Darren Main, Simon Park, Shiva Rea, John Schumacher, David Swenson, Kimberly Wilson and Rodney Yee.

When Miri isn't practicing yoga, she can be found writing strategic communications at work, walking her black Labrador, playing with her two sons and sampling Wisconsin's award-winning cheeses with her husband.



Lilias, Madonna and Me

by Erin McVittie

I will never forget my grandmother's reaction when I told her I was going to be a yoga teacher. "Isn't yoga for really fit, skinny girls?" I still hear that statement ringing in my ears from time to time.

Rewind about 10 years, when I was a 21/22 year old girl living in Northwest Arkansas. I had heard a lot about yoga, but it never meant much to me. **I sort of rolled my cynical eyes—and imagined a lot of granola and patchouli.**

Then, Madonna came out with her "Ray of Light" CD. Being a huge fan at the time, I read a lot of her interviews. She constantly seemed to mention yoga, and she put such a glamorous and deeply spiritual spin on it, I had to know more. So, I hopped in my car, drove to the nearest Wal-Mart (in Northwest Arkansas, you never have to go far to get to a Wal-Mart), and bought a LILIAS! VHS Box set.

I was hooked instantly. Lilias Folan was the perfect combination of hard anatomical facts and loose hippy fun. I jumped up, excited every morning to practice with ol' Lilias. As I practiced, I eventually began to notice a change in myself. My body was toning up, and I was making much better decisions when it came to food. I was amazed because all this happened without any conscious effort on my part. I slowly began

Every day I try to
pass on self-
acceptance and
strength to my
students.

to get healthier, and I thanked my lucky stars for yoga and Lilias Folan.

Sadly, life began to get in the way, and my practice slipped into non-existence. My healthy habits vanished, and I ended up putting on more weight, losing the muscle tone and forgetting the "ahhh" feeling after a good practice. Things stayed like that for a few years. Then, fast forward to me moving to Ireland in 2004.

I had a really hard time adjusting to life in rural Ireland. I had no car, no job, no friends and a husband (at the time) who worked really odd hours. So, I was left pretty much to my own devices, and I came pretty close to losing my mind. One day, as I was flicking through the local newspaper, I noticed an advertisement for a yoga class above a pub not too far from my apartment. I decided I would give it a shot.

I mean, it couldn't hurt, right?

Lo and behold, the teacher (Laura) was an American, and we made fast friends. I made it to class regularly, and after a time, Laura approached me about being a teacher myself. She asked me if I had ever thought about it, and my instant reaction was, "Are you crazy? No way!" My knee jerk reaction was something like this: Who would possibly come to my classes? I was severely overweight at the time and felt my poses were sloppy and sweaty. **Let's face facts; you don't see girls with jiggy bellies and big booties doing Warrior 1 in *Yoga Journal!***



Laura persuaded me to look into teacher training, and after I got over my initial negativity, I did research it. After several months, I decided to take part in the same training series Laura had: the YTTC (Yoga Teacher and Training Centre). My mom was very excited for me, but my grandparents were pretty skeptical. I already told you what my grandmother said, but my grandfather was a bit more enlightened. He said simply, "Yoga? Isn't that just a bunch of sitting around, breathing?" Yea, Grandpa, not quite.

So, my start date arrived rather quickly. I had an almost 3 hour drive to Northern Ireland where the training was, and the whole way I wondered if I had made a very expensive mistake. I began to imagine that I *would* be the elephant in the room no one wanted to talk about. **I envisioned everyone in the class to be waif like and much more knowledgeable about everything from Garudasana to the Gita.** My assumption was pretty spot-on. I was the biggest in the room by a very long way and used that as the perfect excuse to isolate myself from the "fit" girls.

Luckily, my instructor (Marie Quail) took me under her wing, immediately. Marie let me stay in her home on most course weekends and helped me feel comfortable. Well, as comfortable as I would allow myself to be.

The hardest part of my training then (and currently, truth be told) are inversions, especially the dreaded Shoulderstand. All the other girls gracefully pulled themselves up, moved easily into Halasana (plough) and looked gorgeous while doing it. Me, on the other hand, I had to "heave" up into ½ shoulder stand and began to feel instantly claustrophobic because my "chestal areas" were smothering me.

Shoulderstand is relaxing? HA! My asana!

I was soul destroyed after our inversion lesson. All these doubts came bubbling up in my mind. I felt terrible about myself and my practice. I was very focused on emotionally cutting myself with internalized insults. I suffered in even more secluded silence than usual.

Marie noticed my demeanor and took me aside. **I folded like a house of cards and told her I HAD made a mistake with teacher training.** Who would possibly look to me for advice on health and happiness? No one, that's who.

Now, Marie is no pushover. She is amazingly blunt and tells you exactly what she thinks. She told me I was wasting a lot of time feeling sorry for myself, and maybe people *would* come to me *because* I'm different. "You could open up a whole new market" is how she put it.

Those words have stayed with me from then until now—and will stay with me always. I have been teaching yoga for 3 years in April of 2012 and I *love* it. I have even branched out to teach yoga to children. Sure, I have days when I look at my Warrior 2 in the studio mirrors and see nothing but bulges and rolls. **Thankfully, those days are fewer.**

My teaching process is different than most because I let my students know I am on a journey with them. I assure them there are poses I struggle with and poses I cannot stand. **I also make sure they know that no one's practice is perfect, no matter what the books, DVDs, and magazines say.** So every day I try to pass on self-acceptance and strength to my students. Also, every day they come in, I am so thankful for their reassurance and am learning self-acceptance through them. It's a brilliant balance!



Erin McVittie is originally from the United States, and she discovered yoga in her living room. After hearing about the benefits of yoga, she began practicing with videos by Liliás Folan. Since moving to Ireland in 2004, she began studying under Laura Feeney in Mullingar. With Laura's encouragement, Erin attended the prominent Yoga Teacher and Training Center (YTTC) in Lisburn. Erin is now accredited with the highly acclaimed YogaEd program and is continuing her education with Anna Guest-Jelley, Founder of Curvy Yoga.



Coming Into Alignment

by Tisha Morris

My first memories of doing yoga were in 1996. I was 26-years old and bought a book in the Bargain Book section of Borders in Memphis. There was something about the word *Yoga* I was attracted to. But it didn't make sense to a rigid, conservative attorney focused on becoming a judge one day.

I kept the book in the guest bedroom of the apartment my husband and I shared. In the mornings or after work, I would go into the guest bedroom, get the book out and try a pose or two. Looking back, it seemed very secretive. **I think I even did the poses behind the bed and slid the book underneath when I was finished.**

What was I hiding? Turns out, a lot.

In the years following, I amped up my yoga practice by investing in a few Rodney Yee DVDs. **I would have power abs, dammit!** Despite my questionable intentions, I maintained my attraction to yoga. And then it was in 2000 when everything changed. I reconnected with an old friend and she took me to a *real* yoga class. By the end of class, I felt like I had been to the chiropractor, therapist, and church – all in one. I was hooked.

Call it the mind-body connection, but soon thereafter I realized something else: I was gay.

By the end of class, I felt like I had been to the chiropractor, therapist, and church – all in one.

For the next few years following, I would sporadically go to yoga classes. **Yoga classes did not come easy to me.** I had a lot of room to go before touching my toes. And my heels saw no chance in hell of ever reaching the mat in down dog. Worse than that, I didn't feel comfortable wearing tight yoga clothes.

Now, I'm not overweight nor do I have any body abnormalities. In fact, I was blessed with a 5'7", 125 lb. body. **The problem was that I felt like a foreigner taking up this shell.** I had no idea where my left pinky toe was (let alone ground it into the mat) or where my shoulders were in relation to my ears.

I had absolutely no body awareness.

It has taken 15 years of practicing yoga and five years of teaching yoga to (almost) fully *embody* my body. I can now touch my toes, reach my heels to the ground and feel stronger at age 40 than I ever have. **In conjunction, I am living a life – personally and professionally – that is in total alignment with my true self.**

I no longer hide behind the bed. I certainly don't want to be a judge. I love my partner. And I feel fabulous in yoga pants.

Now if I could just master Tadasana.

Yoga is a journey. Life is a journey. Namaste.



Tisha Morris is a feng shui consultant and the author of *Feng Shui Your Life: The Quick Guide to Decluttering Your Home and Renewing Your Life*. Prior to entering the healing arts, Tisha practiced law and obtained a Fine Arts degree in Interior Design. She is also a certified life coach and teaches yoga at Sanctuary for Yoga in Nashville, TN. Visit her online at www.tishamorris.com.



Finding Comfort in Curves

by Zo Newell

I've been at odds with my body and physical existence for about as long as I can remember. Though I don't recall this, I was a breech birth; my very entrance into the world was reluctant and problematic.

I was an active, athletic kid, given to lying on the floor, attempting to put my feet behind or on my head. When I started ballet classes at seven, I quickly learned that adult approval came from my body's ability to perform. I went for the deepest plies, the highest and widest leg stretches on the barre. My feet were naturally strong and flexible; I showed off my amazing point, and I anticipated the glory of toeshoes by standing unaided on the tips of my toes.

"Doesn't that hurt?" my friends said admiringly. **Hell, yes, it hurt; but it made me "more;" it got me attention.**

It was worth it.

I discovered yoga at fourteen, in an ashram setting. The director, whom I called Doctorji, was a young Indian psychiatrist from a family of spiritual teachers and Sanskrit scholars. A sort of proto-Deepak Chopra, he had opened a retreat center near my parents' home; it attracted residents of all kinds from the greater New York area. People came to teach and study Indian music, dance, cooking, yoga. My own home was not a happy place for me to be, and Doctorji, who was nothing if not perceptive, encouraged me to spend time at the ashram.

I made it my refuge.

This was before the days of props, teacher training or safety awareness. Asana was performed on the bare floor or outside on the ground. There weren't regular classes, although at times someone would gather up the kids and lead us through a practice such as the salute to the sun. Otherwise, I imitated what the adults did.

My models were chiefly men from ascetic traditions. Their bodies were strong and hard. They wore very few clothes. They stood on their hands and wrapped their legs into full lotus; they took one foot into their groins, reached around behind their backs to grab it with the opposite hand, and then they leaned forward.

They just did it.

They also fasted, observed silence, and chanted or stayed awake for hours and days. They were marathon meditators bent on subduing the body's claims and asserting the power of the mind, in a no-holds-barred struggle whose prize was, supposedly, spiritual enlightenment.

I thought they were amazingly cool.

I twisted my knees into knots to be like them, I stood on my shoulders and the back of my neck (to its later detriment), and I got attention, yes indeed. One of those muscular, hard-bodied men was a sexual predator with a taste for children.

I told no one about the sexual abuse. Perhaps someone noticed, though, because the man involved was sent away, and I went away to boarding school, where I acted out its effects



through eating disorders, depression, and a variety of self- and body-punishing behaviors. I developed the conviction that I was fat (I weighed 102), and I exercised like crazy.

Skip ahead to my late twenties: I'm in graduate school at Harvard, a high achiever with killer migraines. I walk miles a day; I jog. **I spend at least three days out of every month in bed, incapacitated by pain.** Someone introduces me to Iyengar yoga; maybe it will help with the migraines.

In my first class, I use muscles I never knew I had! Afterwards, I hurt in places I've never even felt! **I'm hooked.** The migraines persist, but I become convinced that if I just *do more* yoga, more difficult poses, I will someday subdue my body and transcend the pain.

This does not happen.

I graduate. I get married. I move to Nashville. I find a therapist who works with sexual abuse issues; I get involved in the women's movement. High achiever that I am, I *become* a therapist who specializes in sexual abuse issues, and I write about women's spirituality and body-centered recovery for a feminist publication.

People love my stuff. I'm a role model of healing. Strangers call me up to tell me how much my columns mean to them. I find an Iyengar-certified yoga teacher and begin teaching. On a trip to San Francisco, on this teacher's urging, I meet Judith Hanson Lasater (cue trumpets, sunlight, angels scattering yoga props); **I discover restorative yoga.**

In restorative yoga, most practitioners I know are women. They wear gentle, moveable clothes. Judith is smart, articulate and precise

in her teaching; she exudes friendly authority but she never imposes herself on the student. From her I learn the concepts of support and *comfort* in asana.

She will not let me hurt myself. This is a revelation.

I had thought yoga was about escaping suffering by beating the suffering body into submission; here, I find that it's about not-suffering. It involves finding out what I need to be comfortable in a given situation, or pose, and giving myself all the support I want.

It involves finding out what I need to be comfortable in a given situation, or pose, and giving myself all the support I want.

From Judith, I learned, slowly, to mother myself, to nurture myself – something my own mother had been unable to do. I began to teach an entirely restorative curriculum, which at that time was unknown. I began calling

what I did "Yoga for Women."

My classes attracted women who were middle-aged, who had injuries, chronic pain or illness...women who were *overweight*. By now, my body had settled into the kaphic curves which are normal for it; **women told me they weren't intimidated in my class because I was, as one put it, "not exactly thin" myself.**

Today, I continue to study with Judith whenever I can; I've even been privileged to assist her. I had a recent several-year hiatus from teaching much yoga, occasioned by two things: I broke both arms in an accident, and, a year or so later, I started a doctoral program from which I've only recently emerged.

In this uncertain economy, I am feeling my way back as a teacher. I am older than many of my



students, I have physical limitations from two accidents, I'm still "not exactly thin" and my hair is beginning to go gray. All this, as the yoga market is exploding more than ever before with glitz, glamor, youth!

But at the same time, I see that a lot of us, not only women of my generation, of "a certain age," but some of the younger ones, are stepping forward to claim our bodies and our practice as women, as householders, as everyday people. I associate this vision of yoga with Judith, because she is the first I know of really to articulate the path of a twentieth-century woman yogi, someone with kids and a husband and a job to attend to.

This "living your yoga" model is far from the body-punishing model I encountered as a child. It's soft, it's receptive, it's about receiving the pose rather than "doing" the pose. Ultimately, it's not really about the *pose* at all. It's philosophical, contemplative, non-linear, womanly... yes, it's curvy.



Zo Newell was introduced to yoga as a child. In 1991, she began studying restorative yoga with Judith Hanson Lasater, Ph.D., P.T., who remains one of her primary influences. Zo earned her teaching certification in 2001 at the 1,000-hour level through the Southern Institute of Yoga Instructors. From 2006–2010, she co-directed The Yoga School in Nashville. She is the author of the award-winning *Downward Dogs and Warriors: Wisdom Tales for Modern Yogis* (Himalayan Institute Press, 2007) and "Ever Since Eve" in the feminist biweekly *Citizenne* (1990–1992). Zo has worked as a hospital chaplain and a counselor with survivors of trauma, sexual abuse and domestic violence. She currently teaches restorative and therapeutic yoga and yoga philosophy in Nashville, TN. She holds an M.T.S. from Harvard Divinity School and a Ph.D. in religious studies from Vanderbilt University. She is married to James R. Newell, Jr. Visit her online at www.zonewell.com.



The Transformative Power of Yoga

by Lisa Papez

I remember the first time I decided to give yoga a try. It was totally an impulse decision. I was 23 years old and on yet another diet. I'd been bored with my usual go-to workout routines and was craving something a little bit different. I had no intentions of going to a yoga class, not in my big body.

But a VHS two-tape set caught my attention: AM & PM Yoga with Rodney Yee and Patricia Walden. The back of the box claimed that each tape was less than 30 minutes. **That seemed do-able, and I figured a little more flexibility would be nice.** I picked up a "yoga kit" that came with a mat, a strap and a couple of bricks. I didn't know why I needed a whole kit, but again -- I was feeling impulsive.

I integrated the tapes into my daily routine. I would roll out of bed, still in my pajamas, and onto my yoga mat, press play on the VCR, and let Rodney Yee bring me from half asleep to awake and stretched out. The same routine in reverse became my bedtime ritual -- this time I would climb on my mat just before bed and let Patricia Walden guide me into relaxation. It was so effective at getting me ready for sleep that I would sometimes fall asleep on my mat, waking up an hour or more later, just long enough to climb off my mat and into bed.

And then one day, as I was lying on my back with my hand on my belly, following along with the tape, something remarkable happened: **I realized that I was really enjoying the touch**

of my belly under my hand! My belly had always been one of my most hated body parts. But instead of feeling disgusted at the soft flesh under my palm, I was marveling at the flow of my breath as it filled my belly.

I felt amazing. I felt valuable. I realized that my body was a gift.

It really was a magical moment. **That was the moment when I first realized that yoga was actually beginning to heal a life-long disconnect I'd had with my body.** When I stood tall in Tadasana, I felt strong and stable, poised and balanced. I had a new awareness of my body, of the wonderful and amazing things it can do.

I like to say that yoga became a part of my soul that day. It hadn't really ever been a "workout" for me. It had become a touchstone, something that made me feel connected and beautiful. Starting and ending every day with that sense of connection created a complete paradigm shift in how I would live my life -- and how I would see myself over time.

I started getting brave enough to try new Yoga videos. I explored power yoga, yoga for abs, yoga for hips and thighs, yoga for relaxation, and many others. I rotated the videos and practiced with different ones. And I noticed that I started to walk taller. I had a secret. **All those women walking around in their skin-tight yoga pants, looking flawless, and going to**



their fancy yoga classes had no idea that there was a secret agent among them: a fat yogini coming into her own, in the privacy of her living room.

From videos, I graduated to podcasts, which were essentially yoga classes that had been recorded live and offered up to the community to practice along with. With these, my flexibility, strength and body-awareness grew with my practice, and I found that, before long, I had a solid understanding of most of the basic asanas. I started noticing that I would close my eyes throughout most of my practice as I turned my attention deeply inward. And along with this sensation of turning inward came an even deeper appreciation for my body--and myself.

Simultaneously, I began transitioning away from constant yo-yo dieting focused on some number on the scale or tag in my jeans to a mentality of self-care and mindfulness. Instead of worrying about my weight, I began celebrating my yogic milestones: deeper and more relaxing forward bends, better balance in Tree pose and better upper body strength in Downward Facing Dog.

It was more than seven years into my regular practice of yoga before I felt brave enough to step into an actual yoga class. It was being offered at my office in the building's gym for a really reasonable rate, and I just couldn't pass up the opportunity to take that next step.

But let me tell you, it was terrifying.

Everything I'd ever seen or read about yoga up until that point had been seemingly entirely focused on very slender people. While I knew I

had pretty good flexibility and could hold my own in a basic class, I also was aware that people might stare. **I was even more afraid of how the instructor might react to me coming into the class.** I wasn't sure if she would look at me funny when I pick up my belly and moved it to the side to get deeper into a twist, or when I spread my knees wide in child's pose -- all too aware that the thickness of my thighs prevents my bottom coming to touch my heels.

I almost ran away before I could walk in the door. But, I didn't.

Instead, I stuck it out. And while there were times that it made me feel anxious and uncomfortable to be the only fat yogini in the room, I learned a lot of valuable lessons in that class -- and it's one I still attend regularly whenever I can.

After a while, I slowly began to venture out elsewhere in the community. Each new class, studio or workshop I attended would bring back all of those anxieties. **But each time the class began, and I re-connected with myself, all that anxiety and fear would melt away and it would be just me on my mat once again.** Sure, sometimes the instructor didn't seem too sure how to relate to my body, but I learned to be even more careful to look out for my own alignment -- alignment I could feel but an instructor used to slender bodies might not be able to see.

Last year, I made the next step in my yoga journey. I decided to take what I'd learned about how rewarding yoga can be, especially for those in bigger or curvier bodies and turn it into something I could share with others. I took the leap to begin studying for my 200 hour Yoga Teacher Certification. Last fall, I began teaching a small community group a very gentle, body-positive style of yoga.

Now, I can't imagine not teaching yoga. It's my greatest love.



Yoga was the primary driving force behind my personal transformation from self-hatred to self-acceptance and finally to self-love.

Today, my practice consists of an ongoing, deeply personal practice, regular classes with yoga teachers out in the community and the practice I teach to my students which always teaches me so much as well.

Thanks to yoga, I can now say that I have a healthy and positive relationship with my body, with food, and with others based on all that I have learned through this transformative practice, both on and off the mat.



Lisa Papez is also proudly known as a Fat Yogini. Based in Vancouver, BC, Lisa teaches a gentle and accepting form of yoga designed to be accessible to all levels (especially the absolute beginner!), regardless of body shape or size, gender, or level of ability. As an out and proud queer femme, Lisa's classes are very welcoming and accepting of all genders and sexual orientations/identities.

You can read more about her offerings at her website, [Body Positivity Yoga](#), on [Facebook](#) or on Twitter [@fatyogini](#).



How Yoga Helped Me to Love My Body

by Rebecca Park

I started taking yoga classes about 5 years ago at the gym. They were taught by a couple of the personal trainers who were definitely more fitness yogis than spiritual ones.

My sister had been practicing for a while at this time and seemed to really enjoy her teacher, so I went searching for a "real" yoga studio. On the recommendation of a friend, I tried Mandorla Yoga – one of the only studios in town and met a lovely instructor named Stefani Hoyt. I started taking her classes and was hooked. **She had a very small studio that only held about 8 students so it was fairly non-threatening.** I enjoyed the Vinyasa Flow style yoga she taught, but I work shift work as a nurse, so I would often have to miss the class I wanted.

When I became pregnant with my first baby, I thought prenatal yoga would be great. But since I hadn't really developed a practice, I just sort of let it go. Unfortunately, at 38 weeks my daughter was stillborn. This was a devastating loss for me. **I was so lost; I didn't know what to do.**

I had gained a tremendous amount of weight while pregnant, so I joined Weight Watchers for the umpteenth time (I always refer to myself as a WW repeat offender). I started running with a running group, and as I lost the weight and got in better shape, I began to love my body again.

Before returning to work from my maternity leave, I went to visit my sister and she took me to a yoga class with her teacher. **Doing this**

reminded me how much I enjoyed yoga.

While visiting her, I also started reading her old Yoga Journal magazines. This was when my mind was opened to what yoga could be and do for me. I came home and booked a private session with Stefani and talked to her about my loss, and she gave me some ideas about beginning a practice.

I soon became pregnant again, and with running and working full time, I just didn't have time for yoga classes. To prepare for the birth and help deal with an intense and anxiety riddled pregnancy, my husband and I took a hypno-birthing class.

This program involved a lot of meditation, which I loved and surprisingly found I was pretty good at.

The meditation really worked to keep me calm and focused during my pregnancy. I found hypno-birthing was only somewhat effective during labor for me despite all of our practice. I was such an emotional wreck during delivery because mentally I was right back to my first delivery. I found this made it very hard to stay present and focused on my meditation.

After an uneventful and natural, drug-free birth I **was blessed with a healthy baby boy who changed my life forever**, this time in a wonderful way. After Graeme was born, I continued to attend yoga classes on an infrequent basis while I was busy being a new mom.



One year later when I became pregnant again, a few of my friends wanted to try a beginner yoga class being offered at Mandorla Yoga by the teacher training students of Stefani's. **This is when yoga helped me to fall in love with my body.**

The first week I was the last one in the room before class started, so I had to sit in the front row of a crowded room (by now Mandorla had moved into a bigger studio space). This made me self-conscious and nervous about everyone staring at the big girl in the front, and I was 5 months pregnant, too.

Half way through the class, though, I was feeling really good and had stopped thinking about everyone else in the room and was just enjoying the yoga.

At one point we were sitting on the floor doing wide angled seated forward bends, and although I can't get my chest on the floor, I can easily reach well past my toes. While I was doing this, I glanced behind me to see three skinny girls grabbing the hems of their lululemons because they couldn't reach their toes. That was when I realized that **even though I wasn't as skinny as they were my body could do things easily that others found challenging.** We all have our own strengths and weaknesses, and we need to work with and through these things on and off our mats.

Yoga is not about what you look like or what poses you can and can't do; it is about so much more than that.

After going to this class, I decided to join the Monday night prenatal yoga class Stefani offered at Mandorla. As the months of my pregnancy went by, I faithfully came to the prenatal classes where I learned to connect with my breath as well as learning postures to help during labor all while connecting with a wonderful group of women.

The delivery of my daughter was everything I could have hoped for. **I felt calm, connected to my body, controlled and totally present.** Every time someone new came into the room, I heard the nurse say "she is so controlled." I owe all that to yoga.

Recently I have come back to my mat and have started a regular home practice for the first time. It is still in its infancy, but this time it is really sticking; it just feels right. I became a vegan when my daughter was only a few months old, and this has helped me feel more like I am living yoga everyday by the choices I am making.

I read an article that was written by Anna through a link on Facebook and found Curvy Yoga, which has really changed my outlook. My sister is a now yoga teacher. She has always been thinner than me and in my mind looks like a yoga

I now know that I don't have to wait until I am an ideal size to pursue my dreams.

teacher. As much as I wanted to teach, I thought people would just laugh at me or think "what does she think she is doing up there?" After finding Curvy Yoga, I now know that I don't have to wait until I am an ideal size to pursue my dreams.

I have always kept myself at arm's length from the yoga community. I think of myself as a kind of closet yogi. The more I look into the yoga community, though, the more I realize that they are accepting of everyone. **Yoga is for everyone.** I was the one responsible for my distance.

I have lived an interesting life filled with great loss and great triumph over that loss, which has brought me great joy. I have a lot to offer, and the yoga community would be lucky to have me. I am experimenting with different styles of yoga on my own and am searching for



something or someone who speaks to me. I am planning on going to Costa Rica next year with my sister for a yoga retreat; this is something I would never have considered before.



Rebecca Park is a full time mother of two gorgeous children Graeme (2 and a half) and Robyn (almost 1), a full time wife to her wonderful husband Shawn and a full time Registered Nurse in a busy Trauma and Intensive Care Unit. She has been a curvy girl most of her adult life. She really found yoga after her first baby died and she didn't know what to do or how to go on. It took a while to stick but she is really enjoying the path it is leading her down. She loves to spend time with her fantastic family and friends. She is a little crafty and she loves to cook great vegan food!



Yoga for Every Body

by Sally Pugh

I came to yoga in the 1990s when I was finding my way through a serious illness. Yoga helped me in so many ways, **maybe the most important of which was learning not to be afraid.** As I was healing and doing my own yoga practice, I was offered a scholarship to attend a yoga teacher training at The Expanding Light near Nevada City, CA. I very gratefully accepted and have been teaching ever since.

Teaching yoga for large women was not something I ever planned to do -- the work came to me. In 1997, I was asked to take over an aerobics class for large women called Major Moves (which had been started at Kaiser Hospital in Oakland several years earlier.) I hadn't had any experience teaching a class specifically for people of size but was really drawn in by the desire and commitment of the students. **One of the long time students tutored me, giving me important pointers about what was different in movement for many people of size.**

A few years later, one of my Major Moves students who knew I taught yoga asked if wanted to teach a yoga class for large women, and I leapt at the opportunity. Twenty-five women showed up for the first class. **Yoga for Large Women classes have been meeting continually since 2001.** Some of my students are still from the original group, and the work has expanded to include workshops and retreats.

Yoga has become very trendy (and big business) now in this country. When we see photos of people doing yoga, they are mostly

young, thin women in difficult poses. It's a great disservice to yoga and to the millions of us who don't look like the people in the photos.

I have had so many women tell me they thought they couldn't do yoga because they weren't "flexible enough" or something enough.

The truth is that yoga can be practiced by everybody and every body. Sharing the gift of yoga with my students has been and continues to be a wonderful and rewarding experience. I continue to learn from them and deepen as a yoga practitioner and teacher. I am very grateful for the blessings of yoga in my life.

I'd like to share what some of my students have said recently about their experience with yoga:

"I just wanted to let you know how much better I feel after last night's session. Having missed three weeks ... I was feeling quite beat up and stiff. My knee had been hurting a lot and I was verging on despair. BUT after yoga last night, I feel a million times better and my knee doesn't hurt!"

"From experience we know that with a larger body, some moves just don't work (there's sometimes too much of me in the way to bend in certain ways). What I didn't realize was that every body has limitations that can be adapted for when doing yoga, and from conversations with some of my thinner yoga-loving friends, my body is better able to do some things than their more typical yoga body - I'm often surprised at my strength. When I finally got up



the courage to give yoga a try - the friendly greeting from you and your Saturday morning students was why I stuck with yoga, and why I keep coming back. That, and the fact that no matter how tired I am when I arrive, I leave feeling powerful and energized."

"There are so many distractions in our world. In yoga, I find renewed peace and contentment inside. Yoga gives me hope and helps me reconnect to something deeper."

"I'm the girl least likely to...do yoga. I had a lot of preconceived ideas about what yoga was:

- *Yoga was for new age jerks who could not deal with the modern world.*
- *Yoga was for lame brains who listened to bad music.*
- *Yoga was for people who were looking for something that didn't exist.*

But as it turns out, yoga was for me. It helped me relax and focus, it helped me make peace with myself and work my body in a gentle and ultimately loving way. Now I crave its pace and its strengthening. I am very grateful to Sally for making it a good experience. She didn't judge my attitude or my appearance - she just shared her knowledge and practice with me. It was powerful, healing, and authentic and I am thankful I got over my prejudice. I don't anticipate embracing crystals or Reiki but will not automatically dismiss them without trying them first."

"The session last Saturday was great. I found myself "going deeper" and taking some deep breaths a few days ago when I got frustrated with a situation at work, rather than react overtly to what was going on around me. So, now I'm trying to practice some of the techniques we use in our yoga practice during

work and other activities, and always to be more mindful."

"I feel both grounded and uplifted at the same time - floating and centered, tired and energetic, ready for action and at peace."

Yoga can be practiced by everyone regardless of body type, age, physical ability, etc. I encourage everyone who is interested in practicing yoga to look beyond the commercial image of yoga and **find a way of practicing that nourishes them.**

You have a right to check out classes, interview teachers and find a teacher you like and trust.

You have a right to check out classes, interview teachers and find a teacher you like and trust.

We can ask from yoga whatever we want, and if we practice, yoga will be our faithful partner, guiding and helping us in any ways we want. All yoga asks in return is that we give it regular time and space in our lives.

Namaste.



Sally Pugh is a Certified Ananda Yoga teacher. She has been teaching yoga in the Bay Area for the past 20 years and has extensive experience working with people of all sizes. She recently released [*Expanding Into Fullness*](#), a 40-minute home practice DVD modeled by her students and designed for large women (and men).

In addition to Yoga for Large Women, she holds yoga and meditation retreats at the Calistoga Spa Hot Springs for people of all sizes and genders and teaches yoga for employees at Alta Bates, Summit and Herrick Hospitals and Restorative Yoga at the Claremont Resort and Spa. Visit her online at [her website](#) and [on Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



Root and Reach

by Tina Robbins

For a long time, I was a yoga dabbler. A class or a video here and there, nothing serious, though I always liked the way yoga made me feel.

What I didn't like was the nervous feeling that I had going into the classes at my gym, wondering if I was going to make a fool of myself (or if someone would be watching me, judging me). As a curvy woman, I watched the women who were thinner or more flexible, the ones who could do the poses just right.

The little voice in my head would tell me, these women weren't living with the persistent pain of arthritis creeping into their joints; they weren't as overweight as me. **They weren't like me, they were somehow better, and I let myself believe that there was something wrong with me.**

So I stayed a dabbler.

Then, in June of 2011, I was laid off from my job. I was stressed and worried and knew that I needed to commit to something that would keep me centered and get me out of the house. So I went to my local yoga studio and splurged on a month long pass.

Every day for one month I went to gentle yoga for an hour. **I had decided that this time I was going to experience the class and stay rooted in my body.** I was going to focus on myself and not concern myself with what anyone else was doing, or if they cared what I was doing. Some days the class was full, but

most of the time there were only a few other people, and for the first time, it really didn't matter.

Each day I went to class and allowed myself to sink into the poses. I learned how to use props for the first time and didn't feel bad for needing the support. I learned to breathe through the discomfort and allow my body to open and relax. I felt my joints release their hold on pain, and **I felt my body grow stronger.** I was gentle with my body, and my body responded. The arthritis and tendonitis in my shoulders and wrists stopped hurting for the first time in close to a year. My low back and hips opened and my spine straightened.

I was gentle
with my body,
and my body
responded.

I felt powerful and graceful.

The little voice inside my head began to quiet. I stopped caring what anyone else thought, and I realized that they were all more concerned with themselves than me anyway. **I also realized that I had been guilty of the same kind of judgment that I was worried would be directed towards me, and I let go of the comparisons.**

But most importantly, I remembered.

I remembered that my body holds me up, that my body carries me. That being fully in my body made it easier to allow my spirit to connect to something larger. It allowed me to let go of some of the hurt and anger that came with my



lay-off. It freed me up to start working through those emotions.

Yoga began to heal me: body, mind, and soul.

Eventually the month was up and I couldn't afford another pass, but I still try to get to the studio from time to time. I do my yoga at home now, and not as often as I would like, but it set me back on the path to peace during an incredibly difficult time. **All I need to do is to step onto the mat and I can feel myself start to settle.**

Yoga heals me, holds me, and keeps me centered. It fills me with gratitude and keeps me rooted in my body so that the rest of me can grow.



Tina Robbins is a transformation travel guide who works with women who are mapping out a new road for themselves. Together they explore practical and soul strengthening ways the client can feel great about the new direction they are headed and the life they are creating. She currently works 1 on 1 with clients and through her monthly tarot coaching program Life Keys. You can find her [on her blog](#), [Facebook](#), or on Twitter [@openroadscoach](#).



The Revolution Started With Yoga Pants

by Noël Rozny

Pants are always a problem.

A gap exists, a yawning mouth reminiscent of the Grand Canyon, between the small of my back and the waistline. Piles of fabric pool around my ankles, while the same fabric fights to stretch across the landscape of my hips. (My hips, in turn, protest and threaten to strike.)

Jeans, khakis, dress pants – they really don't make bottoms for curvy short girls. **Except, that is, for yoga pants.**

My affair with yoga pants didn't begin easily; in fact, we started as star-crossed lovers. For years, I remained monogamous to traditional, loose-legged jogging pants (which refused to breathe in my Bikram class and stuck to my sweaty skin like wet leaves), all the while eyeing the wares in the windows of Lucy and Lululemon from the corner of my eye. One Christmas, my exasperated mother ignored my objections and bought me my first pair of skin-tight, low-rise, flared-leg yoga pants.

They peered out at me from beneath the Christmas ribbon and tissue paper. **All I could think about was how big they were going to make my butt look.**

"Would you just try them on?" My mother sighed. "For heaven's sake, you know I saved the receipt. We can always take them back if you really don't like them."

When I slipped them on, they hugged low at my hip bones, just how I like them, so I felt like an old Western gunslinger. Peeking over my shoulder in the mirror, I saw that yes, they *were*

as tight as I expected them to be, but it didn't matter. For once I *liked* the ways something tight looked, riding all smug around my hips and thighs, winking and whispering "I told you so." I didn't feel thick or embarrassed or like I needed to drop the

I've learned that if yoga is a celebration of the body, then my yoga pants are the popping champagne cork, the first firework, the beat of the bossa nova.

reindeer cookie I was nibbling on. I felt, as cliché as it might sound, like a woman.

I decided I'd give them a dry run. The first time I wore them to class, they wrapped themselves around my thighs like ivy vines, not in constraint or discomfort, but in silent support of Warrior 2 and Half Moon. The bottom hemlines flared out in a way that seemed decadent and regal, reminiscent of a mermaid's tale. They applauded each time my feet left and returned to the mat.

It was official: we were in love.



I've learned that if yoga is a celebration of the body, then my yoga pants are the popping champagne cork, the first firework, the beat of the bossa nova. When I slip into them, I slip out of the need to apologize for the fullness of my hips, thighs and calves, the need to tie a hoodie around my waist or wear a long coat to cover up what I feel everyone is staring at in judgment.

(You know the kind of stares I mean. Like when you walk into a department store and the salesgirl traces your hourglass with her eyes, lifts her eyebrows as though she just caught the scent of something unmentionable, and says "well ... **let me see if I can find anything in the back.**")

My regular everyday clothes, despite tailoring and belts and "curvy" fits, feel like a battle. I feel like they are constantly going to war with my body. I feel like they are fighting my muscles, my tendons, my bones—muscles and tendons and bones that I work very hard to take care of. They are, quite frankly, exhausting.

My yoga clothes don't fight against me. We come together in yoga and they are the cavalry, the reinforcements, the emergency first aid kit. The way they fit to my curves isn't condescending. It's supportive and strong and almost sensual. I feel like Venus and Athena all at once.

I never imagined I could feel this good, this much like myself, this much at home in my body.

Especially in spandex.



Noël Rozny is a web editor and content manager who loves hot yoga, the written word, and all things social media. By day, she writes on the topics of career and education. By night, she works on freelance projects and her blog, [frenchchristmas](#). Find her on Twitter [@noelrozny](#).



Support Yourself

by Stacey Beth Shulman

This is a love story about me and my yoga bolster.

You see, when I first started taking yoga classes, I couldn't sit comfortably on the floor. Almost immediately after I settled into Easy pose, which is, I swear, yoga's most ironically named posture, my lower back would start to ache, my neck would tighten, and my shoulders would slump forward.

I would squirm and shift, trying to get comfortable in what looked like it should be such a simple, basic posture.

In my mind, I was chiding myself for not being able to assume the peaceful stillness the other people around me were able to achieve. I **criticized myself for not being able to neatly place my feet on top of my thighs in Lotus pose, like my teacher was able to do.** Inevitably, the stream of negative comments would become ever more harsh, including things like *If everyone else is able to sit on the floor, then you should, too* and *If only you lost (fill in the blank) number of pounds, you would be able to sit on the floor with no trouble at all.*

For as much shame and guilt I heaped on myself as I compared my body to others, it's quite amazing that I am teaching yoga full-time today. **I mean, really, if my teacher had spoken to me the way I was speaking to**

If my teacher had spoken to me the way I was speaking to myself, I would have left in the middle of the class.

myself, I would have left in the middle of the class and never come back!

My world changed the day I was introduced to the idea of using a yoga bolster during seated postures. Finally I could look like everyone else! Sort of. The next hurdle in my head became getting over the idea that I actually *needed help* to sit on the floor. My monkey mind was chattering endlessly about how embarrassing it was to require a cushion while sitting. **I mean, really, didn't my body have enough cushioning on its own?**

Gradually my yoga practice began to work its magic. As I gained more and more acceptance of myself and my abilities, it became easier to acknowledge and honor my needs rather than trying to somehow ignore them. I began to find all kinds of ways to use a bolster – sitting on the edge of it in Easy pose and astride it for Thunderbolt. I curled myself around it in Child's pose and put it under my knees at the end of class in Savasana, yoga's final resting posture.

I became a bit of a bolster connoisseur, always trying to select the plumpest one from the stack in the corner of the studio.

The love affair began when I purchased my own bolster, covered in purple canvas. **I schlepped my bolster to every class, where it would provide the stable foundation my body needs for certain postures.** Over the years it has received my sighs of contentment and tears of frustration. It carried me through my yoga teacher training, when I discovered the bolsters in our practice space were too thin and



squishy for my taste. It has soaked up the musical vibrations of countless kirtans and sunbathed in the backseat of my car when I wasn't in class.

I have even taken it with me to outdoor concerts and other non-yogic events requiring me to sit on something other than a chair. *Gasp!*

The sunbathing has resulted in the cover fading to a kind of a lavender-ish gray, and the stuffing is rather compacted now. **Sadly, it is time for me to retire my current cushion in favor of something a little more firm.** I will buy it a bright new cover and store it in my office for use during yoga therapy sessions, so all of its good mojo won't go to waste.

We have come a long way, my bolster and I. I am grateful for all of the lessons it has taught me, including letting go of what it looks like on the outside in order to honor my needs on the inside and that it's perfectly fine to accept help when I need it.

How will you allow yourself to be supported in your yoga practice?

How will you allow your yoga practice to support you?



Stacey Beth Shulman is a Yoga Teacher and Yoga Therapist in Atlanta, GA. When she is not on the mat, she loves reading, cooking, painting, dancing the 5 Rhythms, spending time with her partner of 12 years, and playing with their cat, who gets only mildly annoyed. You can find her online at www.curvyogini.com and [on Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



Contentedly Not Comparing

by Rebecca Soule

You can perhaps imagine that growing up from the 70s onwards, in a family full of independent women of all ages and backgrounds, there might be a little bit of focus on diets, body, hair and make-up. This is not to say that there wasn't any work going on.

When I say independent, I mean INDEPENDENT.

From my perspective as a child, men in our family were sort of, well, at the periphery, looking on. My great grandmother and her sisters, my grandmother and her twin sister, my mom and her three sisters and me and my two sisters, well; we were, um, IT. Remembering now it was kind of like I know that my grandfather was around, and I know that there were husbands and dads and stuff, but **it was kind of like "Oh, did you hear something?" when a man spoke up.**

The other thing I remember is the weight of every woman going up, going down. There was a lot of talk about diets and what size clothes you were in. **Greetings at family get-togethers too often began with "Oh, you look great, have you lost weight?" and the response "Oh, no, I'm fat."** In this group of women, keeping a healthy weight, or just being plain healthy, was a struggle.

To be sure, there was a lot of yo-yoing.

And there was this one man who wasn't so nice about it. To hear "Oh, better watch out, you're gonna peak out" from him was dreaded. I didn't really understand what it meant until I reached my teens and my older sister went to college. "Oh look, she's peakin'!" he would say.

"Peaking out" was the disgusting term that he came up with to describe what happened to a woman's body when she went from the skinny of youth to, well, not so skinny. Cruel. Who says that to his own daughter?

I decided that from that minute onward I would make a concerted effort to stop comparing myself.

For the most part, the grans and my aunts would circle the wagons and surround us with accolades, being sure to **tell us younger ones we were perfect whenever they heard us talking about ourselves the way they talked about THEMSELVES.** But some words are insidious, and just plain mean, and the dialogue gets in there and... we all learn that there is no such thing as perfect, right?

For me, besides the natural and beautiful changes of curvature and so forth that come with maturity, I was very lucky, or very terrified; I'm not sure which: I didn't yo-yo. Once I reached my "peak" body size, I stayed the same weight and size for much of my life. And furthermore, if



I did gain a few pounds here or there, I could just pick up more physical activity and the extra baggage would simply melt away.

Or so I thought.

It wasn't until late in the twenties and early thirties of living with my body that I heard these words from a brilliant teacher: TRY NOT TO COMPARE. Love what is. What you are, who you are. The words, of course, came from my first yoga teacher, Ti Harmony.

He said it during class one afternoon. It was as if someone turned a light bulb on and shined it right on pratyahara. Which is ironic, because I didn't know anything about pratyahara at the time, and **shining a light on something that is all about drawing inward is kind of funny when you think about it.**

But I realized there in Trikonasana (it was such a profound moment that I totally remember, with complete clarity, the pose and where I was in the studio) that for most of my life I'd been comparing myself to others, to people, to that imaginary Rebecca who was going to peak out. In that moment on the mat, I decided that from that minute onward I would make a concerted effort to stop comparing myself. I would listen to my mind, and when the dialogue of comparing my body, successes, achievements, with another would start, I would consciously make an effort to stop it and to say **"Hey, you're doing your best and you are wonderful the way you are"**.

And yes, the dialogue continues, but in an honest way, to evaluate if I am doing my best, putting in the effort to create the best life I can live. But I approach this in a loving, nurturing way. It is also wonderful to think that his teaching awakened me to my mind, and it was *the* moment I began fully paying attention to my

mind. I started listening to the chatter and turning it down.

After years of practice and meditation, I can even turn it off from time to time!

Importantly, this is why I teach yoga to every body. When I talk with someone, first I listen to the person, rather than see the body. **As a teacher, I see the body, in all its beauty, and help it move into shapes that are safe and sound and perfect for that particular body.** Young, old, big, small, wiry or curvy, chances are, they have their own "peak out" sentence and dialogue. That dialogue can make it hard to love yourself, and to not compare.

If I can help them hear the dialogue, change it, stop comparing, and love themselves, for even just a moment...if it was that profound for me to have found the dialogue and learned to listen and turn it into something loving, **imagine how profound it might be for them?**

The next time you're walking down the street, or waiting in the check-out line, or sitting in a restaurant, practicing or teaching yoga, and you see a curvy body, check-in with your dialogue. Are you seeing the person? Are you comparing yourself with them in fear or superiority? Listen to your dialogue and turn it towards love. To quote my teacher Alan Finger: "Love for yourself, love for others, love for the universe."



Rebecca Cheeks Soule (the 'e' is silent) lives in New York City with her Soule Man. She feels blessed to be able practice and teach yoga--with and to every body. She started Seva Soule Yoga 2 years ago and feels incredibly grateful to have met AGJ and the Curvy Yoga community through Twitter ([@sevasouleyoga](https://twitter.com/sevasouleyoga)). You can also find her [on Facebook](#) and [her website](#).



The Blessing of Blurry Vision

by Ami Spencer

I was avoiding the yoga studio. In fact, I'd been avoiding it for two years. Once a regular at the morning yoga classes offered at my gym, I had taken to practicing yoga at home with the help of videos and podcasts. I had come to a place, though, where **I wanted to take my practice deeper**--and I knew classes were the answer. When a co-worker asked if I'd join her for a mid-day class near our office, I finally agreed.

Initially, I had blamed my missed classes on scheduling conflicts, but eventually I admitted my ego was holding me back. I was carrying an extra twenty pounds now, and I worried about being imperfect in a packed room of perfectly thin and flexible bodies.

Even my coworker, someone relatively new to yoga, would surely be better at it than I was. She was a size 2, after all.

When we got to the class, we rolled out our sticky mats at the back of the studio and settled in, waiting on the instructor. The class filled quickly, and I watched the other students warming up in effortless poses while I slipped off my shoes and socks.

As the class began, I decided to take off my glasses, too, figuring they would end up being a distraction as they slid down my nose in downward facing dog. Someone dimmed the lights, and I had to squint to see the instructor. But within a few minutes I realized I was also blind to the other students and my own

reflection in the mirrors. My blurry vision became a wonderful blessing. In the absence of sight, there was **no longer any reason to compare my poses to those around me or to judge the mirrored reflection of my rounded body**. I wouldn't be able to see them even if I tried, so instead I turned my attention inward.

I listened to my breath flow through me, steady and reliable. I felt my feet connecting with my mat, finally understanding what it meant to find the "four corners" of my feet. I pictured my muscles firming around my bones. I paid close attention to the instructor's voice, **moving in and out of poses with confidence**.

Without a bit of warning, I became free and unhindered. Thanks to my imperfect vision, I was perfectly at ease, and the full studio became a class for one.



Ami Spencer is a yoga teacher and writer living and learning in Baltimore, MD. Visit [Ami's website](#) to view a partial portfolio and learn more about her. You can also read the flotsam and jetsam of her life at [Writing: My Life](#), her [Ami's Asanas](#) Facebook page or on [Twitter](#).



How Appreciation Leads to Acceptance

by Ashiya L. Swan

A large part of self-love is accepting what we see physically. Through an unexpected gift from yoga, I realized that accepting what I saw was tied more to the way I felt physically than how I felt emotionally. As I began to know and understand myself better through my practice, I gained a new respect for my body.

I think differently of my arms and hands now that they can support me in different ways. I love my hips more now that my practice allows me to move with more grace and ease. For all the times I was upset that I couldn't find a shoe in my size, I am especially grateful for the support my feet provide.

Yoga has made me more body conscious, and my yoga practice is how I love my body. I truly did learn to respect my body by honoring where I was and working from there. For me, the process of accepting my body was the perfect lesson in learning to deal with my ego in my practice.

Understanding my physical limits and the specific poses and postures that continue to help me overcome them has become a loving ritual that is **the foundation of my personal self-care routine.** By honoring my body where was, I began the path to the body I knew I deserved.

In my yoga practice, the advanced poses and postures stopped being a goal for me to achieve

and became a benefit for me to receive. My desire to perform more complex poses was not about conquering the pose, but conquering myself and being able to express that control with my body. Whether I was being intimidated by a pose I did not want to try or overly confident and moving too fast, **I had to learn to balance my emotions with my physical ability,** which has helped me to find peace with every part of my body. There is progress in Yoga that only practice can bring, and achieving advanced poses has become a physical manifestation of the mental control within my body.

I am continually reminded that my practice is always about where I am at the moment.

As I continue to deepen my practice and teach others, I am continually reminded that my practice is always about where I am at the moment. **Honoring where I am while committing to what I want creates a space of peace and understanding** that allows me to accept myself as I am. I have learned not to be envious or critical of another by not comparing my practice. While I benefit from my own teacher, my main goal is to receive my training to benefit my personal practice. By remaining focused on adapting my practice to my own body's needs, I am able to gain what I need from my teacher and offer what I have experienced to my students.

My yoga practice has become an act of gratitude for my body that aligns me with my



birthright of healing, and teaching allows me to share that gift with my community.



Ashiya Swan discovered Yoga in 2003 as a method to relieve stress and encourage focus as a graduate student. After a few years of inconsistent Yoga practice, she connected to KemetiC Yoga and her true nature as a healer. Ashiya is fascinated by the connection of the mind, body and spirit in healing and feels that this is reflected in true yoga practice which includes a balance of yoga postures, diet, and meditation. Through Ka Sa Yoga, she teaches Yoga to adults, children and seniors by personalizing classes to meet the needs of her students. In addition to teaching KemetiC Yoga, Ashiya offers nutrition education and planning. Because we can only teach what we know, Ashiya's personal yoga practice is also her guide for her business. By teaching KemetiC Yoga and The YogaSkills Method™, Ashiya is developing a simplified, holistic approach to healing herself, her family and her clients. Connect with her on [her website](#), [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#).



No Such Thing as a Wrong Body

by Tiina Veer

I read these words somewhere not too long ago: "There is no such thing as a wrong body." It resonated with me and has stuck ever since. I can never forget them now. Stop for a minute and repeat them to yourself. And then again, one more time. Repeat them until you can really hear and digest the words. They make a lot of sense, don't they? **So much so that they sound like the truth laid bare.**

"There is no such thing as a wrong body." Revolutionary.

One of the first and best things I did for myself around body image was to stop consuming media that promotes or triggers self-loathing: mainly, fashion media. As in fashion magazines (actually, most magazines targeted at women I just stay away from altogether), fashion television, and anything Hollywood. We've become addicted to these images and consume them blindly as if they were a fix. **If you want to see a shift in your body image, stop consuming fashion media.** There will still be work to do to mend its influence, but any reduction in exposure to that constant onslaught of manipulated imagery can only be beneficial.

This decision, which I made in my late twenties, reflects certain traits that have been with me since I was knee-high: **I've always questioned authority, bucked external control, and am—as my father would have put it—mouthy.** It did create a lot of friction while under my

parents' care (and is definitely one of the reasons I spent a lot of my adult life single!), but I think they're also qualities that had me questioning early on why I should be treated any differently than anyone else because I was bigger.

"There is no such thing as a wrong body."

Revolutionary.

I've been big since forever, have never been thin or considered within "normal range" (whatever that is). I received the same teasing and shaming that every other fat kid—and more and more these days, every other fat adult—suffers. I think that the drive to question authority, wherever that came from, empowered me to have a healthier body image—and self-image in general—and you can do that, too.

Question your beliefs about your body. If you experience self-loathing, question where that came from. You were certainly not born with it. Don't let externally-imposed meaning rule your life, your decisions, or your choice to live your life fully.

Make your own meaning!

Yoga can be an incredible assistant on this journey. People think that yoga is all about the body and twisting it into pretzel shapes and balancing upside-down. Yoga asanas do begin with the body, but **eventually, the asanas and the body become the facilitators to a deeper**



experience: the experience of the practice as a mirror.

Yoga asana is an exploration of the movement potential of your body. Almost everyone has some obstacle to practice. As you practice the poses, breathing and meditation, you have the opportunity to meet yourself (and your obstacles!) as fully as you want to. How do you treat your body as you move through the poses? How do you meet the challenges that your obstacles bring?

You may find that there are ways you meet yourself on the mat that reflect how you meet yourself in your life, and which may be great opportunities for both learning and growth, *and* for acknowledging your current excellent abilities.

Now, on to the most practical piece.

It's all well and good that yoga can stretch me and strengthen me, be my mirror and ya-dee-ya-dee-ya, but how on earth do I get to have any of these experiences when I feel totally out of place in a yoga class? Talk about your major obstacle to practice. I hear you. This was a major obstacle to practice for me at the beginning of my journey, too. So here are a few practical tips I can offer to help you begin a yoga journey if you feel intimidated by the whole idea, or are afraid of getting injured. Yoga can be an incredible lifelong companion, it's worth trying!

#1 Research your local options -- Maybe you are lucky enough to have a local teacher who offers yoga for plus-size women! Check out Anna's [Resources Page](#) for a growing list of teachers. If there's a wide choice of studios and teachers in your area, check out a handful of classes yourself, or ask around to get an idea of which studios are the most inclusive.

#2 Get the best "fit" -- A lot of people say they show up for beginners yoga classes that don't feel like they're really for beginners at all. If you don't have a local teacher specializing in teaching curvy bodies, see if you can find a 4 or 6 week basics course that's for absolute beginners. Take it over and over if you feel like it: there's no rush to get anywhere! Restorative Yoga is also a great place to start, or see if you can find a class called Gentle Yoga. See if you can find a teacher who knows how to modify poses for different body types, and perhaps one that uses props. When I found a teacher who used yoga props, my yoga flame really got lit—props (e.g., bolsters, blankets, straps, blocks) were very liberating, and still are, for my personal practice.

#3 Find small classes -- I felt like a really confused fish out of water until I found teachers and studios that offered smaller classes. It's so great to practice in groups small enough to allow for some individual attention. If big classes are your only option, then so be it, but if you have options, choose a smaller class, at least until you've got some basics under your belt. If you have the budget, see if you can find a teacher to work with one-on-one for a while. This is especially beneficial if you have old or recurring injuries, so you can sort out what's safe and what's not before attending classes.

I wish you the bravery to try yoga! I know from my own beginnings how intimidated I felt about it. I wanted to go to a class for quite a while before I finally jumped in, and I did have to try a number of studios and teachers before I found the right fit. It was worth sticking it out; I'm glad I didn't give up after the first try.



Living in a big city, I knew there had to be a few teachers who could work with my curves. And look what happened: I ended up becoming a yoga teacher myself, and now I train other yoga teachers in the art of teaching round students. Yoga is magical; you just don't know where it'll take you!



Tiina Veer, Founder of [Yoga for Round Bodies™](#), is an RMT, Yoga Teacher & Teacher Trainer, and Director of [Halcyon Health](#) whenever she is not flying a kite, playing with her dog or shooting arrows. Tiina lives in Toronto with her partner, David, and their rescue dog, Taco.



Apanasana

by Priscilla Warner

"I'm going to meditate my way from panic to peace," I announced three years ago, to anyone who would listen.

Inspired by Tibetan monks who meditated so effectively that their brains revealed fascinating changes on MRI scans, I'd decided to try and rewire my brain, too.

Although I'd been plagued by a panic disorder that had haunted me for decades, I felt confident that my plan to heal would succeed. I enlisted the finest therapists, Buddhist teachers, mystics, monks and healers I could find. I attended silent retreats, dunked myself in a Jewish ritual bath, anointed myself with quasi-hallucinogenic Ayurvedic oil treatments, and sat still, meditating, for hours.

I found a neuroscientist who'd scanned the brains of nuns and monks in deep states of contemplation, and he studied my brain too.

I stacked up pretty well with the pros. Increased blood flow to certain areas indicated that I'd become better at focusing my attention and regulating my emotions.

All while eating chocolate.

It was easier to work on my brain than my waistline. I would never have embarked on a journey to lose 20 pounds, develop biceps, or trim belly fat. I was 56 years old; I'd earned to right to eat what I wanted whenever I wanted.

"She's a big girl!" my husband remarked to his friend the first time he ever laid eyes on me, in

a bar, after he'd announced "See that girl? That's the kind of girl I could marry!"

After thirty years of marriage, I'm 35 pounds heavier than I was that night, perhaps an inch shorter, and steadily turning grey. My father has died, my mother's in her 11th year of Alzheimer's, I've had four different careers, and my children have flown the coop.

But my hips are still wide.

And even though I've calmed down, I still get worked up about re-establishing a yoga practice.

So why do a few Down Dogs scare me?

My upper body strength is not on par with my emotional strength these days.

I'm still tough on myself.

Especially when I'm in one particular pose:

Apanasana.

It rolls off my tongue beautifully. And it doesn't sounds scary when I describe it: I lie on my back, bend my knees and draw them into my chest with my arms, both folded. Clutching my elbows, I pull my knees closer and closer into my body.

My body. That's the hard part about this pose.



My body is supposed to fold up into itself. And it doesn't always do that gracefully. **My belly often gets in the way.**

And then I get scared. Afraid that I can't do this pose right. Afraid that I can't do it like I used to. Afraid that my quads are too tight, thighs too fat, arms too weak, and hips too stiff.

I'm afraid that I'm too damn big. That my body will never move gracefully again. That I will never be at peace with how I look.

Other bodies will always look better than mine, other bodies will move more gracefully than mine. They're younger, thinner, healthier, more flexible.

I'm afraid I will never do this pose again the way I used to, when I could wrap my body into itself tightly, when I could run for more than a few blocks without getting winded, when I ate fewer carbs, didn't stare at puffy eyes and wrinkles in the mirror every morning, didn't worry about how I looked from behind, still got my period, and....

And what?

Thinking about my long lost period makes me laugh! What's so great about being young, anyway?

When I was young, I worried about much more than I do now, actually. **Sure, Apanasana was a cinch, but what about getting through college while panicking in small classrooms?** What about establishing my career as an art director while fighting off panic attacks in conference rooms? What about touring the country as a successful author while feeling like a fraud because I took Klonopin for public speaking? I spent endless hours worrying about

how my children would turn out. I lost sleep over how my parents would age and die, how my relationships with people would unfold, how my trip on an airplane or in a car would go, who I'd encounter at a party, business meeting, or interview. I worried about things I can't even remember now.

I had a panic disorder, for God's sake!

And now I'm healed.

I've become less concerned with what my body looks like and more pleased with how my brain feels.

Through therapies like Somatic Experiencing, EMDR and Trager, I tamed the tiger inside of me. I taught my central nervous system to slow down. My meditation practice made me much less reactive to stress, be it at a cocktail party or on a business trip. But **the best thing I learned was how to have compassion for**

myself, no matter how broken or scared I sometimes feel, no matter how slowly I walk, how often I cry, or how inflexible my body feels.

One of the good things about getting old is that I care less about what other people think of me. It helps knowing that many folks are too busy looking at J Lo, Angelina and Gaga to notice me.

I've developed own yoga practice. A teacher I met during the course of my meditation experiment turned me onto Sade's smoky R & B music. When it swells and moves through me, I feel womanly, alive, and sexy.

Sexy?

Yes. Sometimes my body wakes up and feels light. Because the truth is that as my body weight has shifted, so has my emotional well-being. My meditation practice has taught me to let go of heavy thoughts, past grudges,



judgments of myself and others, and the fear that my life has no meaning. Although it's become harder to buy sleek yoga outfits, I've become less concerned with what my body looks like and more pleased with how my brain feels.

I've traded taut thighs for relaxed nerves.

(Okay, my thighs were never taut, but they were slightly more toned.) I've become less rigid about my expectations for myself and more loose in my chest. My breathing delights me these days. I can sit for twenty minutes feeling air pass through me, in and out, keeping me alive, with little effort on my part.

Life can be hard, but not always. These days I can get into Apanasana with hope, but not be disappointed if it's hard to bring my knees to my chest, if my arms slip and slide with exertion, if my attention wanders, and even if I start to berate myself.

"Let go," I say as I engage my arms and thigh muscles.

It's paradoxical but true. Letting go can't happen unless I'm in a position, like Apanasana, that makes me tense up. I can't let go unless I'm in a position that challenges me. I can't let go unless I'm fully engaged in whatever position I find myself in.

And that's what I think about now when I am in Apanasana. I try and let go of all the old stories I used to tell myself about myself. I give myself a great big hug.

And then I love Apanasana.



Priscilla Warner co-authored *The New York Times* bestselling memoir *The Faith Club*, then toured the country for three years, popping Klonopin to ward off panic attacks. In the skies above Oklahoma, she read about Tibetan monks who meditated so effectively that neuroscientists were studying their brains. Vowing to find her inner monk, Priscilla learned how to meditate, chronicling her adventures with teachers, healers, therapists, monks and mystics in her bestselling memoir *Learning to Breathe – My Yearlong Quest to Bring Calm to My Life*. Visit her online at www.priscillawarnerbooks.com. Follow her on [Twitter](#), [Facebook](#) and [Pinterest](#).



Conclusion

You see what I meant in the Introduction now, don't you?

There's something about these pieces—individually and together—that has a cracking open quality.

One of my favorite things about yoga is that its philosophical system encourages *svhadyaya*, or self-study. This internal inquiry process is what can take us deeper into the full practice of yoga, not just asana (the yoga poses).

And the pieces in this book show us this—*svhadyaya* in its depth and breadth but not, interestingly, its completeness. Because it's one of those paradoxical things that can never quite be complete.

The writers here show us why that's a good thing. There's a humming energy quality to their words, **a building and hunger and near bursting towards something new** – both in their own lives and beyond.

Their pieces are hinting at a process: developing awareness of the physical body, then through the physical body, then beyond the physical body—and back/forward again and again. **Yoga gives us this technology of developing self- and body-love and esteem.** And this is really why our curvy community exists: to find our way through a process we didn't used to think was possible—accepting ourselves. Loving ourselves.

Our hope is that you find your own way, using these tools in ways that work for you.

You are not alone.

We are not alone.

Our support network for radical internal and external change is growing.

Thanks for joining us.



To learn more about Curvy Yoga, please visit www.curvyyoga.com.
There, you can join an online community of other curvy yogis,
find pose options and practices created with you in mind and
even bring Curvy Yoga to your area by becoming a certified teacher.

With questions or feedback, please don't hesitate to [be in touch](#).

