

OUT OF THE CAGE

*How yoga freed me from a life
of pain, stress and addiction.*

Eric Peters

Out of the Cage

How Yoga Saved My life

Eric Peters

ISGIP

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The information in this book is not intended to serve as medical advice. Readers should consult an appropriate medical professional for such advice.

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This book is dedicated to my father, whose unwavering support through difficult times inspired me to never give up. Without his help my story would never have been told, and this book would never have been written. Love you, Dad.

CHAPTER ONE

Manny's Doctor

“I know this doctor you should go see, Eric. He’s not like a regular doctor. You should go see him,” Manny said emphatically. We were having lunch at a deli. Manny took a bite of his smoked meat sandwich and continued talking through a mouthful of food. “He’s not like a regular doctor. You should go see him.”

I was surprised by Manny’s interest in my condition.

We had never discussed my health. It was obvious from my appearance there was something wrong with me, but people didn’t usually question me about it. Kids would ask me questions because they’re openly inquisitive, but adults wouldn’t. When they did, they didn’t recommend anything helpful, however sincere their intentions.

Manny was a family friend and a valuable, long-time employee at my father’s business. I assumed my parents had told him about my abnormality. It just seemed odd that Manny felt compelled to tell me about this doctor.

“I think you should go see this doctor.”

“Why?”

“Why do you think I need to see a doctor?” I asked, failing to conceal the sarcasm in my voice. I was sure Manny had good intentions. I knew he was a good man. It’s just that I had endured a lot of disappointment and false hope in my life—the kind of experiences that create enormous doubt and lock you forever in scepticism.

“Well, your father was telling me, you know, about what happened. Anyway, it’s really none of my business but this doctor doesn’t think like most doctors. He looks at things differently. Maybe he could help,” says Manny.

“What does he do?” I asked.

“I don’t know specifically. But I know that he looks at health differently than most doctors. I heard that people like talking to him. Maybe you should go see him,” he urged.

“He’s a shrink isn’t he?”

"No, he isn't! He's a family doctor—but he knows things other doctors don't know about health."

It sounded so mysterious, and Manny wasn't giving me any details, but he seemed to believe this doctor might be helpful. I reluctantly agreed to make an appointment, more to appease Manny than anything else. I could predict what would happen. This doctor would tell me about some new drug, or experimental treatment that he would like to test on my body. I would politely extricate myself from his office and that would be the end of it. Then I'd thank Manny for his concern and move on with my life of pain and discomfort.

When I arrived at the doctor's office, I sat in the waiting area filling out a health form. This was something that I had done so often that I didn't even have to think of the answers. I was only 28, but had been filling out these types of forms for years.

I completed the form, signed it, and gave it back to the receptionist. I brought a newspaper with me, as I often do when visiting doctors, and sat down to read it. Patients would glance over at me. I would force a smile. They would do the same. It was a familiar routine. I turned to the sports section.

One of the many ironies of my condition was that I loved playing sports, but suffered from such pain that it made participation difficult and agonizing. Swimming seemed to be the least painful. I'm not sure why. Maybe because I was floating.

It wasn't always this way. I had a healthy, normal and active childhood. I went to school, had lots of friends, had loving parents, aunts, uncles, cousins and a big sister. We were a typical middle class family. There were issues with my father, a former U.S. Marine, born and raised in Brooklyn, New York, who often made me feel like I was in a boot camp. He had high expectations for me but the way he expressed his opinions wasn't always encouraging. Overall, my childhood wasn't much different than any other —until I was twelve years old.

As I checked my watch to see how long I had been waiting to see this doctor, a nurse opened a door and called out my name. She directed me to an examination room, closed the door and left me to read my newspaper.

Ten minutes later, the door opened. A tall, handsome man with neatly cut black hair, and a stethoscope around his neck, walked in and introduced himself, "Hello Eric. I'm Dr. Backman."

"Hi," I responded.

I don't like visiting doctors not because I have anything against them. For the most part, they're pleasant enough, but it's just that my experiences with them haven't always been pleasant.

Backman was sitting in front of me, reviewing the forms that I filled out

earlier. He asked me a few questions. They were questions I'd heard before and I gave him the same answers I'd given doctors before. I wasn't really paying too much attention to him because I was looking warily at his medical certificates on the wall. I felt certain he was going to recommend an experimental drug. I reminded myself to get a copy of all the risks involved so I could show it to Manny.

"I don't think we can do anything for your condition," the doctor said.

"I'm sorry. What did you say?" I asked.

"There's nothing we can do to resolve your condition. But I think there is something that could help you—but it's not medicine or surgery."

We talked, and as we talked it became apparent that Manny was right. This doctor was different. It was his scepticism that was unique. He didn't believe medicine had all the answers, and thought there was much to be learned from alternative health care. It was difficult for me to disagree with him. I respected his openness and appreciated that his peers probably didn't agree with him.

It was a turning point in my life. This doctor gave me hope, which inevitably led to my relief from my pain and suffering.

CHAPTER TWO

My Twelfth Birthday

It was fall. The leaves were beginning to change color and the nights were cooler. I was going outside to play and my mother told me to put on a sweater. She told me to wear the red sweater, the one I got from my aunt Eileen two weeks ago for my twelfth birthday.

I went to my room, grabbed the sweater, and started heading for the door. “Put it on Eric,” my mother warned. I pulled the sweater over my head, bending my arms into the sleeves.

“Eric, come here.”

My mother had an odd expression on her face, and she asked me to take off the sweater and stand in front of her. She was looking at my shoulders.

“What’s wrong Mom?” I asked.

“I don’t know,” she replied, calling for my father.

“Stand straight Eric,” she instructed. “Look at his left shoulder,” she told my father. “It looks lower than the other one.”

My father looked and asked if my shoulder was sore, or if I’d hurt myself. It wasn’t and I hadn’t. He grabbed my arm and moved it around and asked if there was any pain. There wasn’t.

“What’s wrong with my shoulder?” I asked.

“I’m not sure,” my father replied.

“We better take him to the doctor,” my mother said.

I wasn’t allowed to go outside, even though I felt fine. I went to the bathroom and looked in the mirror. My left shoulder was lower than my right, but when I leaned to one side—they were straight. I thought that this was important so I told my parents. Maybe, they would let me go out to play.

“We’ll visit the doctor and see what he says, Eric. I just don’t want you jumping around until we see him,” my mother said, kissing me on my forehead.

A few days later, we visited the doctor. He examined me and took some x-rays. He talked to my mother and recommended a pediatrician to see. The following week, we visited the pediatrician who told my mother what was

wrong.

It turned out that I had an abnormal curvature of the spine and that it was going to get worse. My spinal cord was twisting like a corkscrew, and it would continue to do so as I grew. Surgery was dangerous. There was no cure.

I was fitted with a brace. It was a full plaster and metal cast around my torso that strapped metal bars against my front and back so I couldn't move my upper body. The bars were joined by a plastic coated metal band that was wedged under my chin and to the base of my skull so I couldn't move my head. The brace wasn't intended to prevent my spine from twisting like a pretzel; instead, it applied pressure to my torso and neck to stop my body from getting any worse. I had to wear this brace all the time, even while asleep. It would only be removed when I took a shower, and it could only be taken off with someone else's help. The brace was like a straitjacket. It was heavy and cumbersome. I would remain in this cage for four years, until the day I stopped growing.

My life, as I had known it, was over. I would suffer from constant, chronic pain and spasms throughout my back, neck, shoulders and arms. What the future held for me was a life of disability, pain, and drugs. I was in a constant state of conflicting emotions. Hope would give way to despair, confidence to doubt, and courage would change to fear.

The medical diagnosis is known as scoliosis. It's a condition where the spine curves from side to side causing the muscles to contort and conform with the curvature. The body becomes disproportionate, lop-sided and deformed. The ribs, hips and shoulders become uneven, and the inside organs adjust accordingly.

The metal bars on my brace pushed tightly against my stomach causing it to move up into my diaphragm which made breathing difficult. Short breaths were easier than deep breaths. Small portions of food were easier to digest than large meals, and consequently I was underweight.

I couldn't move my upper body. I couldn't bend forwards, backwards, or from side to side. I couldn't move my neck because it was locked in an upright position. The only movement that I had, was in my arms and legs.

I could only see what was in my line of vision. If I wanted to look sideways, I'd have to move my entire body. I couldn't look down, and could only look straight up if I was flat on my back. It was difficult to sit in a chair, or to lie down to sleep.

I couldn't see my shoes to tie, or my shirt buttons to fasten, or a spoonful of soup to eat, a book to read, or a piece of paper to write on. I had to find new ways to accomplish these simple everyday tasks, and to do them while frequently experiencing pain. I had a constant ache in my back, and painful

spasms that often lasted for days. I couldn't sleep properly and was constantly tired. I was always hot and sweating. It was very difficult to focus my attention.

I didn't have a desk at school. I had a music stand, the kind musicians use to read sheets of music while playing their instruments. Instead of music sheets, my stand held an open book for me to read, or some paper for me to reach out and write on. When I used a pen, my fingers would cramp and become painful.

To my adolescent peers my physical appearance was a phallic symbol. I couldn't bend. I was always erect. My nickname was "boner", the slang for penis, and though humorous for them, it was emotionally painful for me. I was the teenager with a sexual nickname who couldn't have sex. "Boner" held a double meaning for me. It also meant "an embarrassing mistake", the non-slang definition for the word.

Kids would constantly ask me never-ending questions. Why was I wearing bars? What was wrong with me? What happened? Initially I'd try to answer, but this gradually gave way to fanciful stories of danger, heroism and intrigue. I'd explain I was the sole survivor of a plane crash, stranded on a remote mountain range, living only on bugs and my wits, until eventually I was discovered weeks later by a rescue team. Sometimes, I would explain how I was the victim of a tornado that had sucked me into the air, twisting and turning, until I was dropped to certain death, saved only by tree branches that broke my fall.

Often my stories would relate to events that I read in the newspapers, or had seen on television. One news story was about a mountain climber who broke his back —and so I became that person. I'd explain how I was climbing the summit of Mount Everest and just before reaching the top, I fell and broke my back.

All this was a kind of escapism that allowed me to be someone other than myself. I received corticosteroid injections for inflammation and painkillers for my pain. I lived in a world different than my friends as did my parents from their friends. A doctor suggested my condition resulted from being held too tightly as an infant. You can imagine how that suggestion affected my parents.

My mother was constantly worrying, and when she wasn't worried, she would worry about why she wasn't worrying. She became exceedingly careful, which made her do things very slowly. She's the only person I know who got a traffic ticket for driving too slowly, although if you asked her, she'd tell you it was only a warning. She drove so slowly that one day I decided to get out of the car and meet her at our destination. I actually got there first, though if you asked my mother, she'd tell you that we arrived at the same time.

My father devoted a lot of his time to his business, which was a molding and vacuum plating company that made buttons. He enjoyed his work and provided well for our family. My mother took good care of me, and often over clothed me

and buttoned me up so I wouldn't get a cold. Being "buttoned-up" was an ironic metaphor for my existence.

I was "buttoned-up" and "straight-jacketed" all the time. I was in constant pain. I was rigid and tight. I felt isolated and trapped. I felt as if I were living in a cage, interacting with the outside world through the bars of my enclosure. My mother doted over me and although my father spent a great deal of time running the button business, he didn't ignore me. He knew my anguish. He tried to help. "You need some structure," he told me.

We sat down at the dining room table. He had a blank piece of paper and drew a line down the center, dividing the page into two columns. "We're going to do an assessment of your assets and liabilities," he said. He started writing in the liability column. He wrote entries in the liability column until he got to the bottom of the page. He then turned the page over and drew another line down the middle of the page, so he could continue making entries. When he got to the bottom of the page, he told me to get some more paper. I think we had a few pages of liabilities. He then went back to the first page and began writing in the assets column. After two entries, he stopped writing. "Ok, I think we're done. There are a lot of liabilities, so you need to work on those one at a time," he said.

Somehow, I didn't feel this was helping me. I mostly ignored it because I was fairly certain one of my liabilities was that my attention was always distracted and dispersed, and I couldn't remember things very well. So, as far as this list was concerned, my poor memory was a blessing in disguise because I don't recall anything written on those pages of paper.

However, I do remember I had a counting system for my chores. Every chore had a number associated with it. For example, number "1" was make my bed, (except on Thursday, because that's when the cleaning lady came to our house). The counting system worked fairly well but it was still difficult to remember things. When I'd try to recall something that wasn't part of a routine, it was hard. It was tough for our family.

CHAPTER THREE

Champion

Every summer, my parents would send me to a camp at Lake George. It was a boys and girls camp in the Adirondack Mountains of New York.

It was a great place to be. There were lots of activities and things to do. I tried to fit in as best I could. I would participate in everything to the best of my ability, despite my pain. I really enjoyed being there.

We played basketball at the camp. There were teams that were designated as A, B, and C. The best players were on the A-teams, and the worst players were on the C-teams, although they weren't categorized as such. Actually, I think the A-teams were for experienced 16 players, and the rest of the teams were for beginners and new players, or something like that. But despite the political correctness, all the kids knew that the best players played on the A-teams, and the worst players were on the C-teams. I was on a C-team, which was being generous, because I couldn't jump or bounce a ball. In basketball, you can't get any worse than not being able to jump or bounce a ball. I would run my short, little body around the court trying to cover opposing players. My team mates would never throw the ball to me because there was no point, I couldn't do anything with it.

There was a counsellor who coached an A-team. One day, he asked me if I'd be their honorary captain. He said he asked me because I had the "courage of character." You can imagine how that made me feel. I was transformed from a phallic symbol into a symbol of courage. I felt seven feet tall. This wasn't a fantasy story I conjured up in my head; I didn't have to imagine myself as a survivor of a plane crash or a victim of a tornado. This was real. I was a symbol of courage to others. I was a valuable asset. I wasn't a long list of liabilities. It was very cool.

As honorary captain, I took my role very seriously. I sat on the bench, cheering and encouraging my team mates. Sometimes I'd get into a game and play a few minutes, but mostly I sat on the bench, which was alright with me. I understood my role. By summer's end, our team was in first place and qualified

for the playoffs. We were undefeated through the playoff rounds and finalists for the championship. It was a big event, not only for everyone at the camp, but for parents, relatives, and friends.

We played against a team that had finished in second place, only four points behind us, and who were also undefeated in the playoffs. It was a tightly contested game. The teams were evenly matched. With only a few minutes left to play, the score was tied. The coach called a time out and huddled our team.

“We’re going to change the forwards,” he said. “Billy, Ronnie, you’ve played well, but I’m going to put some fresh legs in there. I need everyone to ask themselves what they can do to help our team win.” He paused and then asked, “What can each of you do better?” He paused again, and there was a moment of silence. Each player was in quiet contemplation. I thought of how I could do a better job of encouraging my team mates. I couldn’t think of anything. Then the coach said, “Let’s go! Lloyd, Eric, take the forward positions.”

I couldn’t believe what I was hearing. Maybe he said my name by mistake. Maybe he meant someone else. I stared at my coach. My mouth was gaping. I was speechless.

“Eric get in there!” he ordered.

Anxiety engulfed me, followed by a sharp pain between my shoulders. I grimaced and nervously moved onto the court taking a forward position. “Why is this happening?” was my only thought I couldn’t hear the crowd, so I didn’t know how they were reacting to me taking the court. I concentrated on playing defence. I couldn’t bounce a ball or jump, but I could run as well as anyone.

Although our opponents had a few missed throws at our basket, we were controlling the ball. We were just keeping the ball away from them. We didn’t want to give them too many chances, but we weren’t taking any shots either.

No one was covering me. No one had to, because I never got the ball. Everyone knew that. With the game still tied, and with fifteen seconds left on the clock, Lloyd ran down the right side of the court, protecting the ball to the outside. He was covered by two opposing players, while everyone else ran to the basket. I was by myself in the far left corner. Lloyd held up. He took a jump shot over the outstretched arms of two players covering him. The ball sailed in the air, bounced off the rim of the basket, and headed towards the corner where I was standing. It landed in my arms. There was no one near me. I was completely alone with the ball in my hands.

“Shoooot! Shoooot!” was all I could hear. I planted my feet wide apart, and raised the ball over my head. I threw my arms forward, as fast as I could, releasing the ball high into the air. The ball sailed towards the basket, hit the rim, bounced straight up, and fell back down through the basket. The buzzard

sounded. The game was over. My team mates went nuts. The crowd went nuts. I went nuts.

My team mates rushed towards me and hoisted me up into their arms. They carried me around like a trophy. Everyone was cheering. It was an unbelievable experience. It was the happiest moment of my life. During that celebration, through all the elation and excitement, while being carried, hugged, twisted, bent and turned, I had no discomfort. My pain 20 just disappeared. The only thing that occupied my attention, was the thought of having accomplished a great achievement.

I felt for the very first time, that if I took off my brace at that very moment, I would be normal. I would be healthy.

I often wondered why the basketball coach put me into that game. He certainly didn't expect me to throw the winning basket and I don't believe he did it to make me feel good. I think he put me in that game to change the thinking of the players—to influence their state of mind.

We weren't sure if we would win or lose that game. It was very close. When I went onto the court, the players knew I was a liability. But the coach challenged everyone to think of how they could be better, and then raised their necessity level by putting me in the game. It was a risk and had we lost, I would surely be the scapegoat. My team mates didn't want that to happen. They had to play better. We had to win. Losing was not an option. They didn't want me as the scapegoat.

CHAPTER FOUR

My Cage

On my sixteenth birthday, the brace was finally removed and I was excited about the changes this freedom would bring to my life.

The muscles in my back were frail and weak from years of atrophy. My movements were slow and difficult. Although this was to be expected, there was something else that was happening to me. Despite the fact my brace was gone, I still felt restrained. I felt mentally restrained in my movements. It was like I was still inside my cage.

I remember watching a television program about goats. It was about how these animals were conditioned to believe something that didn't exist. When young, a goat would be fitted with a wooden neck brace tethered to a length of chain. The chain was then attached to a stake in the ground. Over time, the animal was conditioned to associate the neck brace with the restraint of the chain. Eventually, the goat could be fitted with only the brace without fear that it would wander away. The brace alone, without the chain, was enough to keep the animal mentally confined to an area.

I felt like one of those goats. I felt mentally restrained, tethered to something from which I couldn't get free. There was something happening with me that I didn't understand. When I had pain, it would cause me to have thoughts of anger, and a short quick temper would result. This, I understood. But what I didn't understand, was why thoughts of anger caused me to experience pain, while thoughts of elation caused me to experience well being and comfort. This was a mystery to me, for which there didn't seem to be an answer. There was something to learn from this.

A doctor suggested some exercises for me. They were the kind of exercises gym teachers give you when they have nothing else for you to do. They were warm-up exercises to occupy your time, while waiting to do something more useful. Things like touching my toes, rotating my head, and swivelling my hips from side to side. They didn't seem to be helping me.

Despite my weak muscles and slow movements, I was able to accomplish

something that was very exciting for me. I got my driver's license. But there was something else I was looking forward to, something my friends were experiencing that was equally if not more exciting than getting a driver's license. It was girls. I'd never had a girlfriend. I really didn't know anything about girls, other than the fact that I liked them.

I confided this desire to my older sister and she decided to mentor me on the subject. I learned there were a lot of rules to follow when dating girls. She told me these rules were very important. They're principles to follow, like in science. Although I didn't understand these rules, I trusted her guidance and appreciated her advice.

I learned that you never ask for a first date in person. Instead, you ask for a phone number. Once you have the number, you can phone and ask for a date.

"You can't just go up to a girl and ask for a date," my sister told me. "You have to ask for a phone number first."

"Can I ask for a phone number and then ask for a date?" I inquired, hoping to shortcut the process.

"No Eric! You can't do that. You get a phone number and then you phone the girl and talk to her—and then you can ask for a date," she replied.

The process seemed very complicated. My sister told me there was a minimum amount of time required to talk on the phone, before asking for a date. I think it was thirty minutes, or something like that. I had to phone three days prior to the day of the proposed date and the call had to be in the evening, around eight o'clock, as I recall. This meant that if the date was for Saturday, I had to call on Wednesday evening at eight, talk until eight-thirty, and then ask for a date.

Following my sister's guidance, I asked and received, the phone number of a girl at school. I phoned her on Wednesday. We talked about our favorite films for thirty minutes. I then asked her to go to a movie with me on Saturday. She said, "Yes."

"Great!" I replied, thinking to myself, "My sister is a genius."

On Saturday I borrowed my mother's car and took my date to the movie theater. The parking lot was packed. I drove around for a few minutes and found a parking spot. It was a tight space between two cars along a curb. I had to parallel park. I moved my neck and shoulders very carefully and slowly reversed the car. I inched the car backwards until my rear bumper banged into the parked car behind me. My date screamed: "What are you doing?" I turned my wheels and moved slowly forward, and bumped into the car parked in front me. My date screamed again: "What's wrong with you?" People were staring at me. A couple nearby decided to check the bumpers of the cars. One yelled out, "No dents or

scratches. I think you're okay." My embarrassed date jumped out of the car. "You idiot! What's your problem?" she screamed, slamming the car door and running into the theater.

I got out, locked the doors, and ran after her. I wanted to apologize and explain to her what was wrong with me. I wanted to explain why I have trouble turning my head. I wanted to tell her that the parking space was too small and that I shouldn't have attempted to park there.

She was waiting by a ticket window. She was very upset and angry. She was embarrassed. She waited while I bought the tickets. As we headed towards the seating area, I started to apologize. She rushed ahead of me and ran down an aisle, across a row of seats and sat down. I followed and sat beside her.

"I'm going to the bathroom," she said. She stood up and left. I waited in my seat for her to return. She never did. I watched the movie by myself, and then drove home alone. It would be a long time before I asked another girl for her phone number.

My condition worsened, and it became more difficult to control my body. My muscles would spasm painfully. They would knot and pull in different directions. They were slowly conforming to the curves in my spine and reshaping my physical appearance. My right hip was higher than my left. My left leg was longer than my right. My left shoulder blade stuck out while my right shoulder blade was sunken.

The freedom I desired after my brace came off, wasn't happening. After spending four years in my cage, I felt betrayed. I was frustrated and my stress escalated, as did my use of prescription narcotics.

My father suggested I join the Marines. He told me that the routine and discipline would help me. I believe he wanted me in the Marines for the medical benefits. If, or when, I turned into an invalid or raving lunatic, my medical bills would be covered. I just didn't understand how I would pass a medical examination in order to join. I think my father had a plan for that, but I didn't ask him about it, and he didn't tell me. I wasn't interested in joining the Marines.

I enjoyed reading and I had a passion for learning how others lived their lives. I was interested in knowing the trials and tribulations of others. I turned this passion into a pursuit. I enrolled in University and studied English literature. I read Hemingway, Faulkner and Steinbeck.

My health got worse. My rib cage started to protrude from my back. I was lopsided and my neck tilted to one side. It was a difficult time. I couldn't concentrate very well. I was always tired and would often fall asleep in class. I used drugs to cope and to help me escape the reality of my situation. There was

no pain, shame, blame, guilt, or remorse when I was anaesthetized. However, I knew that this was not a solution. But how else was I supposed to survive?

Through a friend, I met this girl. My friend, Brian, had a girlfriend named Sharon, who had a friend, who was this girl. Soliciting her phone number wasn't needed because Brian gave it to me.

"Give her a call. You and her will get along," my friend told me.

"What's wrong with her?" I asked, curious about the reasoning for the unsolicited number and potential date.

"Nothing. We think the two of you will get along with each other," he said.

"She takes drugs and is deformed?"

"No! Listen Eric, she's a nice girl. Sharon and I think the two of you should meet. That's all."

I called the girl, and we agreed to meet at a restaurant. Still relying on information given to me by my older sister, I made the time of our date for eight o'clock on Saturday. We described what each would be wearing so we could identify each other at the appointed time and place. I arrived early and sat in a booth near the entrance to the restaurant. At precisely eight o'clock, an attractive girl entered the restaurant. By coincidence, she happened to be wearing the exact same clothing described by the girl I was waiting to meet. She walked over to my booth.

"Eric?" she said.

"Yes," I replied.

"I'm Sherri."

"You are?" I responded. I quickly rephrased my words. "You are. I thought it was you," I lied, concealing my embarrassment and surprise.

We ate, drank, and talked all evening. It was as if we'd always known each other. She was bright, caring, honest and attractive. She said I was compassionate, sincere and gentle. I thanked my friends for introducing us.

It felt good to have a girlfriend but I struggled with my life. I was addicted to narcotics and couldn't live without them. I was often lethargic and apathetic. Not only was this straining my relationship with Sherri, but it was affecting my studies. She told me to get off drugs and to deal with my problems—but I couldn't. I didn't know how.

My father suggested I come and work with him in the family business, but I didn't want to. He described me as a rudderless ship without a compass. I wanted to be left alone, to get away, to escape. My mother felt sorry for me.

Despite my struggles, I did manage to graduate. The first thing I did was buy a package of three darts and a map of the world.

I taped the map to my bedroom wall. My hands were trembling and I was

tense. I could feel pain all over my body. I threw some pills in my mouth and washed them down with beer. I waited for the drugs to take effect. From the opposite side of the room, I threw each of my three darts at the map. The first dart stuck into the Pacific Ocean. The second dart missed the map entirely, bounced off the wall and fell to the floor. The third dart landed in Europe.

I walked closer to the map to see where the third dart had landed. It was stuck in France. It had missed the Mediterranean Sea and was lodged in the southern coast of France. The tip of the dart was stuck in “Cannes”. My destiny had been determined by the throwing of a dart. Maybe I’d find happiness there or maybe not. I grabbed my beer and flopped down on my bed.

I remember reading something Thomas Jefferson said about France being every man’s second country. “A home away from home,” I think he said. I couldn’t wait to get there. I popped some more pills and fell asleep.

When I woke up the next morning I started making my travel plans. I cashed in some bonds my parents gave me when I was a teenager and visited a travel agency to pick up a pile of brochures. I decided to enrol as a foreign student at the College International de Cannes. I would study French. I made arrangements with the College to rent a room in a private home in Rocheville, a suburb just north of Cannes. I prepared my passport documents, bought luggage and an airline ticket to Paris. I was ready to go. There was just one more thing to do. I needed my drugs.

A doctor gave me a prescription for enough narcotics to last me a few months. He also gave me a letter for customs clearance, describing the drugs, and giving the details about my doses. I went to a pharmacy and stuffed my prescriptions into a knapsack. I packed my bags, then said goodbye to my family, friends and Sherri.

“I’ll worry about you,” my mother told me.

“You should stay,” my father advised.

“Don’t expect me to wait,” Sherri said.

I had no expectations. I wasn’t thinking of anyone else. I was just running away.

CHAPTER FIVE

Man in the Mask

I arrived in Paris and took a train to Cannes. Across from my seat was a poster. It was an advertisement for the Harlem Globe Trotters. They were on a European tour and their poster reminded me of that basketball game at camp so many years ago, a time of great joy in my life. A time when I had self worth.

I looked down at my knapsack. A sadness came over me and tears welled in my eyes. I felt lost. I was running away from the person I had become. I reached into the knapsack and grabbed a prescription bottle. I popped the cap and took out a couple of pills. As an addict, I had my own dosage. It was enough pills to make me feel better, but not enough to kill me. This is one of the many delusions addicts live with.

I sat and stared blankly out the window. My body was numb. My sadness was gone. My thoughts were vague, detached and of no importance. I was in a drug induced euphoria of nothingness.

When I got to Cannes, I phoned the owner of the place where I would be staying to tell her I'd arrived. I hailed a taxi and gave the driver a piece of paper with the address. He put my luggage in the trunk.

"Merci," I told him.

"You're welcome," he replied in English.

My accent was obvious. Since Cannes is a major tourist destination, most of those living and working in the area speak English.

"Is this your first visit to Cannes?" he asked.

"Yes it is," I answered, as I climbed into the back seat. I didn't feel like talking, so I didn't. He dropped me off in front of a semi-detached brick house. I paid the fare, allowing for a modest tip, collected my luggage and knocked on the front door. A stout, elderly woman with glasses and grey hair greeted me. We exchanged pleasantries and she took me into her home. Madame Dufor was a widow who lived alone and had no children. She rented rooms to foreign students. She had a friend at the school who helped find accommodations for students. Cannes was an expensive place to live, so these arrangements were

appreciated.

My room had a bed, a dresser, a small closet and a desk with a lamp. The walls were completely bare except for a coat of beige paint. A window overlooked a courtyard of peach trees and grape vines.

I unpacked my bags and joined Madame Dufor for some bread, cheese and wine I felt very comfortable. We talked about my trip, the school and France. She recommended I visit the museums.

“They are the best museums in the world. The best are in Paris. You must go there,” she told me.

“Yes. I will. I’m sorry, but I need to go to my room, if you don’t mind. I need to get some sleep,” I told her.

“Of course. I’m the one who should apologize. After such a long journey, you must be very tired.”

I went upstairs to get some rest. The drugs were wearing off and I was very tired.

The next morning I woke up to the smell of freshly baked bread. One of the great things about the French is their food, and I was lucky to have a landlady who was a wonderful cook. After breakfast, I decided to take a bus to Cannes. I had a week before classes started at school, so there was time to look around.

Cannes is a seaside resort on the French Riviera that is a crescent of scenic hills overlooking palm-lined boulevards with high-end boutiques, world class gourmet restaurants, and casinos. Elegant bay front hotels stretch along a sandy beach on a harbor teeming with cruise ships and luxury yachts.

It didn’t surprise me that this was the home of the Cannes Film Festival. It’s a place where you would expect to find the beautiful, rich, and famous.

I walked along the main avenue, the Boulevard de la Croisette. I passed cafes overflowing with patrons dressed in the latest fashions and admired Mercedes and Ferraris cruising by. I felt out of place, but comforted knowing that migrants in tattered clothing, and tourists in casual attire also wander here. It’s a public setting where the unfortunate can be seen among the extremely fortunate. It is a place where toy-boy-toting socialites walk their French poodles alongside whiskered peasants visiting from the countryside. Those that have everything and those that have nothing co-exist on the boardwalks, parks and beaches but not within the exclusive hang-outs like the immense 338-room Carlton Hotel that looms over the main stretch of beach. So many famous people have been guests at this hotel that you wonder if there is a celebrity that hasn’t stayed there.

Elton John featured the hotel in his music video for his song, “I’m Still Standing”, and Alfred Hitchcock used the location in his film, “To Catch a

Thief”, starring Cary Grant and Grace Kelly. In fact, it was at the Carleton that Kelly met Prince Rainier III of Monaco, which resulted in their marriage and her reign as Her Serene Highness Princess Grace.

Across the street from the Carleton is the Palais des Festivals et des Congres, famous for its red carpeted staircase and home to the Cannes Film Festival. I walked up and down these steps and relished the thought that countless celebrities had done the same. As I climbed the stairs I pretended to be someone else—someone famous, rich and handsome.

There are parts of Cannes that remind you of its fishing- port past, with winding narrow walkways leading to small squares where you can buy fresh vegetables, fish, pasta and bread; and where locals play boules (a game where the goal is to get large heavy balls close to a jack). It was at one of these squares where I ate my favorite meal, a large flat bread sandwich stuffed with everything fresh. It was so huge and nourishing that it took all day to eat it. I went up a hillside to an old section of Cannes where a 14th century church overlooks the harbor. I stood there eating my sandwich and admiring the yachts.

I started my course the following week. The campus was not far from the main boulevard and classes usually ended in the early afternoon. There were thirty students in my class and most were from other parts of Europe. It was only a six-week summer course but I was already having trouble concentrating. I wasn't a very good student. I could speak a little French and read some but Madame Dufor thought I was lazy and not applying myself. She didn't know I was a drug addict. She didn't know about my deformity and constant pain.

I wore baggy clothing to hide the bones sticking out of my body in places where bones are not supposed to stick out. I did the best I could to conceal such things. For the most part, I think people just thought I walked differently. For most of my life, people would stare at me because I was peculiar. I did what I could to look normal.

My tilted head was the hardest thing to disguise, but I could slouch my right shoulder so my neck would appear upright. I would practice moving my body in front of a mirror until it became a routine. It was like the routine I had with my chores at home. My routine had numbers just like my chores. Instead of number “1” being “make my bed,” it was “slouch my shoulder.” I had a bunch of numbers for walking, sitting, bending and so on. It was very complicated but my movements looked normal to me, though I was far from normal.

I read French literature by authors such as Balzac and Proust's novel “In Search of Lost Time”, a book that had a meaningful title for me. I would sit on the hot sun-drenched beach at Cannes and read, glancing up every so often to look at half-naked women strolling past me. Cannes allows topless sunbathing.

Although I was 40 still taking my drugs, I wasn't taking as many as before. I felt comfortable and content. My pain wasn't as frequent, or as severe as it had been. I didn't know why.

From the beach, I could see the island of Sainte-Marguerite in the distance. There was a towering stone seawall, behind which you could see the reddish brown rooftops of a fortress. I learned that this fortress was the former prison known as Fort Royal and was a museum. Sainte-Marguerite is a popular tourist destination because it once held a mysterious prisoner, whose identity was a closely guarded secret. He was a man kept in isolation, who wasn't allowed visitors, or to speak to anyone. His only contact was with an appointed jailor, who would bring him food and water once a day. He was identified only as L'Homme au Masque de Fer, because he wore a mask at all times. He was the Man in The Iron Mask.

According to legend, he died in 1703 and the contents of his cell, his clothing, the mask he wore, and his corpse, were destroyed, concealing forever his true identity. There are hundreds of theories about the identity of this man.

One of the most popular theories is that he was the twin brother of the King of France, Louis XIV, who imprisoned his brother to ensure ascension to the throne.

I decided to visit Fort Royal. The fortress consists of a number of buildings constructed of fading pink, gray and brown stones. The windows are barred like jail cells, and they have green wooden shutters that close to obstruct any view to the outside. A larger building contained the cell that housed the Man In The Iron Mask. There is a wide corridor with a number of doors. A plaque outside one of the doors reads: "Prison dite de l'Homme au Masque de Fer," "Prison of the Man in the Iron Mask."

A heavy iron door leads you through a three-foot wall into a white, stone room. There is a single window carved into the north wall of the cell, which is barricaded by three sets of iron grates, each with thick intersecting bars. It was a barren and desolate place.

I thought about the Man In The Iron Mask. Although I had an inclination to draw comparisons to his life and mine—I could not. There was no comparison. There was only a sense of what it is like to be trapped. Even then, there was no comparison. There were so many others who have lived and suffered tragically. There was nothing about my life that was deserving of any pity when viewed from this perspective.

My trip to Fort Royal started a transformation process. I began to change how I viewed my life, not with self pity, but as an opportunity. I was alive and breathing. I was in France visiting interesting places. Despite my addiction and

deformities, as bad as they were, they paled in comparison to the fate of the Man In The Iron Mask. I was certain he would have thoroughly relished the opportunity to trade places with me, if such an opportunity were possible. This gave me purpose, for in my world, there was nothing worse than having no purpose—having no hope.

CHAPTER SIX

City of lights

It was late summer. I finished my course and earned my certificate. I felt I should move on and decided to go to Paris. I rented a room in a hostel. My plan was to visit the historic sites, palaces, cathedrals and museums. I was going to be a tourist. I walked along the Champs-Élysées and through the Tuileries Garden. I climbed the Eiffel Tower and visited the Opera Garnier. I stood beneath the Arc de Triomphe. I sat before the masterpieces in the Louvre and marvelled at the architecture of the Pantheon. But among all these landmarks, the place I felt most inspired, was in a graveyard.

It was not a place that inspired me because of some morbid fascination with death, because this graveyard was not a gloomy place. It was quite beautiful. It was the final resting place for many writers, composers, philosophers, painters, actors, musicians, film makers and innovative thinkers. It was the burial ground for the French novelist, Balzac, and for the American rock star, Jim Morrison, of the Doors. It was where the Italian composer Rossini was buried, as well as the Irish novelist, Oscar Wilde. This place was the Pere Lachaise Cemetery, reputed to be the most visited cemetery in the world, attracting hundreds of thousands of visitors every year to more than 300,000 grave sites.

I would spend many hours in this cemetery. I sat on the grass beside different graves and just read and thought. It felt strangely inspiring to be here. I would sit on the grass and think about my life. I would think about how thinking, in itself, seemed so powerful.

When I was content and happy; I would feel less pain, more mobility, and greater health. When I was anxious, sad, angry, and stressed; I felt more pain, less mobility, and deteriorating health. It was like a two-sided coin. I didn't understand why this was.

I thought about drugs. Drugs placed me between the two sides of this coin. It was some kind of nowhere. It was a place without pain, and devoid of unwanted emotions, the absence of which made me feel better. But it wasn't real health or genuine happiness. It was only a temporary time-out from stress. I was certain

that many of those buried at this cemetery would attest to my conclusion. At one end of this graveyard were the remains of Jim Morrison who died from a drug overdose and paradoxically, at the other end were the remains of Samuel Hahnemann, the physician who was so concerned about the use of drugs that he founded a new way to restore health—homeopathic medicine.

I was sure that if I were to suddenly die here, everyone who knew me would understand. It wouldn't be a surprise or shock "Poor kid, all those problems." "He put up a good fight." "So much pain, so much stress," they would say. "He's in a better place now," they would eulogize.

I would have totally agreed with them, except for one thing—that basketball game. "What happened there?" I thought.

I could distinctly recall the moment when I sunk that ball to win the game. I was happy. I had no pain or discomfort. I felt, at that moment, that my health wasn't merely the relief of pain or the absence of sickness but a result of what I was thinking. When stressed, I felt broken; when relaxed, I felt repaired. At least, it seemed that way to me.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Looking for Einstein

My visits to the Père Lachaise Cemetery reminded me of past conversations I had with doctors. Shortly after my brace was removed, I remembered visiting a psychiatrist to find out if he could help me with my stress. He was a pleasant, friendly man, but he didn't make any sense to me. It didn't seem as if he knew anything about "thoughts" and how they related to my body, something I was interested in learning.

The doctor talked about stress triggers, brains, neurology, genetics, pharmacology, biochemistry and therapies. It seemed to me that his profession, the mental health profession, was a discipline attempting to attach itself to something else. It was as if he were a self-professed musical expert attempting to explain Beethoven's musical style in terms of wave theory so he could appear scientific. He didn't really understand music, but he knew about the science of wave theory, and could therefore tell me how he thought wave pressure was used to write an overture.

I'm sure many of those who pursue mental health as a profession do so because they honestly want to help people. I know how stressful it can be when you have only temporary fixes to a problem and no long-term solution. It would be like a car mechanic whose only tools were rolls of duct tape.

It's not that I knew anything more than this doctor, but from my personal experiences with pain, I didn't feel his answers had anything to do with resolving my problem. When I was attending university, I learned that there were specific principles and laws taught in engineering, physics, chemistry and mathematics. These laws are taught and accepted by everyone as part of a curricula at every university in the world. These laws are precise and are a framework for achieving results. However, there are no universally accepted laws in psychiatry and psychology. There are only controversial beliefs and theories, which have no consensus.

My conversations with this doctor reminded me of something I read about Einstein. He died in Princeton Hospital in 1955 from the rupture of an aortic aneurysm and his body was cremated. Before the cremation, a doctor removed Einstein's brain and placed it in two jars of alcohol for preservation. He did this with the intention of discovering why Einstein was a genius.

Apparently the doctor discovered nothing, and in 1988, he sent Einstein's brain to another doctor at Princeton University. The doctor at Princeton examined the brain and concluded that it had more of a particular type of cell than other human brains, and that this might explain why Einstein was so smart.

Another doctor at the University of California, Berkeley, was sent a slice of the brain, and confirmed the Princeton doctor's findings, but noted that the particular cells in question were only statistically relevant in one area of the brain. This area, with these particular types of cells, she concluded, may explain why Einstein was so brilliant.

Then, in 1999, doctors at McMaster University, in Canada, studied photographs of Einstein's brain, and discovered that it had parts missing. They concluded that this was unusual, and likely explained why Einstein "thought the way he did". Their research was later published in the prestigious *Lancet Medical Journal*.

Perhaps studying dead brain cells may reveal something about how those cells affect how someone thinks. But to me, studying dead brain cells to discover why someone was intelligent or "thought the way they did" is like putting Tiger Wood's golf clubs under a microscope to find out why he has won so many tournaments! The famous psychiatrist and neurologist, Viktor E. Frankl, referred to this view of man as the "nothingbutness" theory.¹ A theory that humans are nothing but the result of a physical condition. According to Frankl, such a view of man turns a human being into a thing.

Of course, we have bodies and are subject to the laws that affect our physical structure. I know that if I put my hands in a fire, they will burn. If I jump into a lake, I'll get wet. If I stop breathing, I will die. But to say that this is all that I am, to suggest that I'm nothing more than my neurological and biochemical interactions with genetic predispositions, is like saying the portrait of the Mona Lisa is merely a mix of paint on canvas, or that a Shakespearean sonnet is basically ink specks on paper. They're more than just physical elements.

I believe that there is more to us than the sum total of our biochemistry and we minimize ourselves when we assert that $E=mc^2$ originated from a piece of flesh. It's a view that assumes we are machines that are dependent on bodily functions, genetic predispositions and chemical interactions. If this were true, how does a brain cell know things that are immaterial? How is it that my genes

know patriotism, my right to vote, or the love that my neighbors have for their children?

Thinking, although interactive with material things, must be immaterial otherwise how could we explain material substance conceiving immaterial concepts? It seemed to me that there must be a relationship between my thoughts and my body, as if they were separate distinct parts of a whole, interacting with one another.

I felt there was something to learn from that basketball game that made me feel so happy, and from the moments of anger that caused me so much pain. There was more going on inside me than just a bunch of atoms doing their thing.

Drugs dulled my pain but they didn't enhance my survival. Narcotics appeared to be an improvement but there is something wrong with this solution. There comes a point where drugs stop being the solution to the problem, and become the problem to finding a solution.

My visa was expiring and I had to leave France. I decided to change the direction of my life. I phoned my parents and told them I was coming home. I was looking forward to seeing them again.

CHAPTER EIGHT

New Beginning

“I don’t know Eric,” Sherri said.

“Well, let’s meet at our favorite restaurant. At least, let me give you the gift I got you in Paris.”

“You got me a gift, Eric?”

“Yes, I bought it in Paris.”

“What did you get me?” Sherri asked.

“Something special. Let’s meet so I can give it to you.”

“Okay, when?”

“How about Saturday at noon. I’ll get there early and wait for you,” I told her.

“Alright. I just can’t believe you bought me something, Eric.”

“See you on Saturday,” I said, and then hung up. I had bought Sherri a sweater in the Italian quarter in Paris. I wanted to get back with her. I loved her. I always did. I just didn’t love myself and didn’t feel I was worthy of her. I didn’t want to hurt her, and I knew that was going to happen if I didn’t get off drugs.

It was important for me to show Sherri I was changing. I wasn’t changed so much physically, as much as I was mentally. Since returning from France, I believed it was possible to change. My outlook on things was different. I wanted Sherri to know that, and hopefully she could help me become a better person.

I still had a drug problem, but I was battling it, taking less, fighting the urges and just accepting my pain. I was working with my father, which pleased him. My parents were glad I was back.

I wanted to do something physically to help my body, and to get off drugs. It couldn’t be too strenuous, but something I could do on my own, and build upon each day. I remembered that at camp, I enjoyed wading into the water at the lake. Wearing the brace prevented me from swimming, but I noticed how other kids enjoyed it. I decided to start swimming and became a member of a health club with an indoor pool.

At first, I would do a lap, then two. Each day, I would try to do a bit more. I started practicing my turns, and timing how quickly I was going. It consumed me to the point where I was swimming a mile every day. I was achieving something, and this made me happy. I also started reading about drugs so I could understand what they were doing to me.

I met Sherri at the restaurant. She was more beautiful than the last time I saw her. She really liked the sweater I gave her, which pleased me immensely. I told her I was doing better and explained that I'd realized a lot of things about myself while I was gone.

"The trip was good for me, in the sense that I began to see my life differently," I told her.

I told Sherri about the Man in the Iron Mask, and about my trips to the cemetery. I explained that I was battling to withdraw from drugs, and that I was swimming a lot. I told her that I didn't want to be an addict any longer, and that I was going to try and deal with my addiction. I asked Sherri, as a friend, if she would help me.

"What do you want me to do?" she asked.

"Just be my friend. Someone to talk to, and share my thoughts with. I really don't have anyone I can do that with. It would help if I did, and I can't think of anyone better than you." I said.

There was an awkward pause, as Sherri looked at me from across the table. Tears started to pool in her eyes. She just looked at me. I looked at her. I could feel my eyes watering and the tears streaming down my face.

"You're crying," she muttered.

"You too," I babbled. Sherri leaned across the table to embrace me. We hugged. We cried. We held each other tight.

"I'll help you Eric. I'm proud of you. We'll get through this together," Sherri wept.

"I love you Sherri," I cried.

"Love you too, Eric."

CHAPTER NINE

Desperation

Getting off narcotics is not an easy thing to do. I have always taken drugs for stress and pain. There's nothing pleasant about pain. It hurts. I took drugs for one basic purpose—to numb myself. They anaesthetized me so I wouldn't feel the hurt.

I looked up “narcotic” in a dictionary: “any chemical substance that will relieve pain or stress, induce sleep, cause mental numbness, or deaden awareness.” It comes from the Greek word *narkoo*, meaning, “to render torpid, numb, motionless, and without feeling.”

This is what I wanted. But there was something else happening. Although the narcotics were making me less aware of my feelings, they were a blunt instrument. They disrupted my ability to think, my ability to perceive and to resolve, and this was a problem. It made it harder for me to be effective and to function. By comparison, being alert, aware and energetic is the opposite effect induced by narcotics.

Every time I felt pain and stress, I'd take a narcotic. It became a pattern and a loss of control. Life got worse, not better. That's the illusion. Narcotics didn't restore or enhance my health or survival. They weren't resolving the cause of my stress and anxiety, pain or depression. I realized I couldn't ingest happiness. I no longer believed unhappiness was resolved by popping a pill that I could get with the same convenience as picking up fast food.

Narcotics are not antibiotics, insulin or vaccines. You take them to induce a degree of unconsciousness. This is helpful if you need surgery or need to temporarily freeze (numb) a body part, or ease suffering in death. But I wasn't dying, and I did not want to live my entire life in a self-induced state of semi-consciousness or body-part freezing. But I also didn't want to live my life in pain and stress.

Surprisingly, I found little information on how narcotics actually work, but discovered lots of information on what they were doing to my body.

Narcotics influence every part of your body. The effects begin once the drug

enters into your bloodstream and this happens very quickly. Narcotics both stimulate and depress, depending on the dosage. When I first took a narcotic, it would stimulate and then it would depress. All narcotics do this. When I took a small dose, it would stimulate and speed up the activity in my body. If I took a larger dose, it would slow down and depress the activity in my body. If I took a very small amount of a depressant, it acted as a stimulant. Take more, and it will depress. So the difference is in the dosage. In my case, I took larger doses of narcotics because I had a lot of depressing and numbing to do. If I took too much, I could die.

The interesting thing about narcotics is that our bodies react to them like poisons. Our bodies naturally try to restore any damage caused by narcotics and will eliminate them from our system because they are toxic. With continual use, as in my case, the body gets better at eliminating the narcotics. This means more narcotics are needed to achieve the desired effect, and this can lead to overdoses.

As the doses increase over time, our body develops a tolerance and immunity to the narcotic, so larger dosages are needed, or we have to find another narcotic to which we're not immune.

With prolonged use, all functions in the body eventually adjust and adapt to accept the drug which becomes part of our system, and this inhibits the repair and restoration of damage. Getting rid of the narcotic then becomes very disruptive and difficult. You become changed, as if you've become a new you. It is not a pleasant experience. It's not something you would want for your children. It is not something anyone really wants. It's like banging your head against a wall, then wearing a helmet to reduce the effects of the blows, without ever asking the question: "Why's my head banging against the wall?" Does wearing a helmet help? Of course it does. Is it a solution? Of course not.

I was also having trouble with my feet. I've worn orthotic footwear for years because my legs weren't the same length. As my body continued to change, I'd replace my orthotics to compensate for the changes. But now, my heels were excruciatingly painful.

I made an appointment to see a podiatrist. He had this elaborate equipment for evaluating movement and pressure. I walked along this padded walkway with sensors that fed information into a computer.

"You have four and a half times more pressure on your right heel than normal, and four times the pressure on your left heel than is normal," the doctor told me.

"What should I do?" I asked, assuming he had something, like a special pair of shoes.

“Don’t use your feet. If you continue to walk you will destroy them,” he said. “For how long?” I asked. “A year at least.”

“A year!”

“If you don’t, you’ll permanently damage your feet,” he asserted.

“Isn’t there anything I can do?”

“You need to eliminate that pressure or you will crush your heels. You can take medication for the pain, and get physiotherapy to help with the healing process.”

“So I just need my feet to heal and then I’ll be alright?” I asked, ignoring his suggestion to take narcotics, and thinking that perhaps I could teach myself to walk on my toes. I would need to practice in front of a mirror—get into a routine—make it look normal, but that would be difficult, I thought. I then realized that the way I trained myself to walk, the way I shifted my weight to my heels, might actually be crushing them.

“No, I don’t think so. The structure of your body is abnormal so it will always be a problem. If you let your feet heal, you may use them for a while and then you’ll have to get off them again.

“You mean I can walk on even years, and not walk on odd years? Is that what your telling me?”

“Unfortunately. But it really depends on how well you heal and whether the pressure stays constant or if it gets worse,” he said, pausing for moment, “Or you should get yourself a wheelchair.”

“A wheelchair!”

I’d finally arrived at the proverbial fork in the road and neither path offered a desirable destination. One path led to narcotics and death; the other led to constant pain and insanity. I had to find my way out of this. There had to be another option.

CHAPTER TEN

The Good Doctor

“Eric, let’s have some lunch. I’ll drive,” Manny yelled. He was down the hall from my office. My door was open but even if it were closed, I would still hear him. Manny was loud. He was one of those guys that sounded like he was yelling when he talked. I didn’t understand why he talked that way, but he didn’t seem to think it was anything unusual.

“Everybody talks differently,” he’d say. That was true of course, but I didn’t think yelling was the same as talking.

“Yeah, Manny. Where are we going?” I yelled.

“Lester’s,” he shouted.

We ate there often. They had great sandwiches. We got to the restaurant and grabbed a booth.

“How are you guys doing today?” asked the waitress as she poured us some coffee.

“Good thanks,” I said.

“Fine Susan,” yelled Manny.

“The usual?” she asked.

We both nodded as we sipped our coffees.

“Eric, have you ever met my sister?” Manny asked.

“No, I don’t think so.”

“She has arthritis and her fingers are twisted. She likes to knit and every winter she makes me a sweater. Awful designs. They have animals on them, birds, rabbits, deer, bears, and sometimes fish. I never said anything to her about the designs. I don’t want to hurt her feelings, so I only wear them when I know I’m going to see her. Anyway, I wanted to tell you something.”

Manny paused as Susan placed two sandwich plates on our table.

“You don’t like animals?” Susan said, overhearing the conversation, like everyone else in the restaurant.

“I like animals. I just don’t like them on my clothes,” responded Manny. Susan smiled and poured us some more coffee. Manny took a bite of his

sandwich. He lowered his voice so that only half the people in the restaurant could hear him.

“I know this doctor you should go see, Eric. He’s not like a regular doctor. You should go see him,” Manny said emphatically.

“Manny. Do you think you can whisper?”

“I think you should go see this doctor,” Manny said, toning down the volume.

“Why? Why do you think I need to see a doctor? What kind of doctor is he?” I was abrupt, defensive and short-tempered, because that’s the way you are when you’re in constant pain.

“Well, your father was telling me, you know, about your condition. Anyway, it’s none of my business but I’m told this doctor doesn’t think like most doctors. He looks at things differently. Maybe he could help,” said Manny.

My back hurt. I was shifting my posture, swaying my shoulders back and forth trying to relieve the pain. I was trying to stay calm. There were a lot of people in the restaurant and I imagined someone thinking to themselves: “Look at that loud guy talking to that fidgety, crazy guy.”

A sharp pain suddenly shot through my right hip. I winced.

“Did your sister go see this doctor?”

“No, her friend did and she told my sister about this doctor. She said a lot of people like seeing this guy.”

“What’s so different about him?” I asked.

“I don’t know, but my sister said her friend thought he was great. Your dad was mentioning that your doctor retired, so I thought I should mention this guy, that’s all.”

“What’s his name?”

“Backman. He has an office in that new medical building next to the bagel shop. You know that building?”

“Yeah I do. Alright. I’ll let you know when I see him.” I felt agitated and distracted. I didn’t like the feelings or pain that I was experiencing. I didn’t like having these feelings when someone was trying to be helpful. I forced myself to be jovial but this isn’t easy to do when you’re in pain. I teased Manny. I dared him to wear his animal sweaters to work. He didn’t think it was funny. He made me promise not to tell anybody about his sweaters.

I made an appointment to see Dr. Backman. When we met, he told me that he didn’t think medicine could do anything for me.

“There’s nothing we can do to resolve your condition. But I think there is something that could help you—but it’s not medicine or surgery,” he said.

He told me about an article he read in the New England Journal of Medicine

and advised me to explore an ancient practice that originated in India thousands of years ago. He didn't refer me to anyone, or suggest where I might go to explore this ancient practice. He just recommended that I should look into it. It was the ancient healing practice of yoga.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Feet First

I thought it strange that a medical journal would have an article about yoga. According to Dr. Backman, the authors claim that yoga is effective in minimizing, even eliminating back pain. I've heard of yoga, but didn't know anything about it. I didn't associate yoga with my area of expertise, which was pain. I considered pain to be a subject I knew better than most. Severe physical and emotional pain was a subject I had been intimately involved with for decades.

I told Sherri about my visit with Dr. Backman and about his recommendation.

"Can yoga help you with your feet?" she asked. Sherri is very practical. In her mind, although I had tremendous back pain, fixing my feet was of immediate concern.

"I don't know. I don't know anything about yoga," I told her.

"Did the doctor recommend some place to go? A yoga instructor to go see?"

"No, he didn't. I can make some calls," I told her.

"Feet first," Sherri said, smiling.

"Okay." There was a double meaning to her words that we both understood. When you live with pain and stress, there is a tendency to be compulsive. You tend to react to things. You don't think rationally. You do things that make you appear not very bright, like the time I threw darts into a map to find a place to escape to. You tend to have odd ideas about things that are the wrong ideas. It's very easy to get upset, and even easier to be critical of anything and everything. This makes things worse—not better. This happens because pain and narcotics does this to you. You're not actually like this. It's not really you. Pain and stress robs you of your ability to think. You can't think clearly when you're in pain. You also can't think clearly when you are numb on drugs.

Sherri reminded me to explore yoga, step by step, and not to jump headlong into it without thinking. I called this yoga studio and spoke to an instructor named Irene. I asked her if yoga was good for the feet. She told me that it was

good for all parts of the body. It was good for muscles, tendons, bones, and organs. She told me yoga helped with relaxation, breathing, and sleeping. She said it increases energy, reduces stress and pain, makes you stronger, healthier, and enables you to focus better.

"How?" I asked, thinking she was exaggerating.

"Come to my class on Tuesday evening and I'll show you," she said. "The first class is free."

I accepted her offer and she gave me the address of her studio. I left home early that night, just in case there was a problem finding her place. I often have trouble finding locations that I'm visiting for the first time. Anyway, I found her studio alright but I got there early. The door was locked. But it had a little window and I looked inside. I saw a large spacious room with nothing in it except blue mats on the floor. A trim, healthy looking woman wearing pink tights and her long brown hair pulled into a ponytail, came walking up the sidewalk towards me.

"Are you Eric?"

"Yes. You're Irene?"

"Yes. Hello," she said, extending her arm to shake my hand. She unlocked the door and we went inside.

"We take our shoes off in yoga class," she told me. I took mine off and left them at the entrance.

"We won't be starting for a few minutes. I have to get something from my car. I'll be right back. Just sit down on one of the mats. This is a beginner's class and a few more people will be arriving," she told me as she left.

I sat down on a mat in the middle of the room. The mat was thin and I felt it would be more comfortable if it were thicker. Then the door opened and two girls walked in. They were attractive and were wearing white tights. For some reason, I never thought of wearing anything other than a baggy t-shirt and blue jeans. Irene didn't say anything about wearing tights. I don't own any tights. I wouldn't be comfortable wearing tights even if I did.

"Is this the yoga class?" one of the girls asked me.

"Yes," I said. "Irene will be back in a few minutes. She just went to get something from her car."

The two girls stood awkwardly at the door. I was sitting on my mat with my knees bent up to my chest, my arms around my knees, with my hands clasping my forearms. My back and feet were sore. I noticed my right sock had a hole in the toe. I put one foot on top of the other to hide it.

"Have you been doing yoga for long?" asked one of the girls. She thought I was doing a yoga pose.

“No, I’m new,” I replied, not knowing what else to say and wondering if they could see the hole in my sock.

“This is our first class too,” they said in unison, giggling as they realized they’d said the same thing simultaneously.

“My sister does yoga and she really likes it,” said one of the girls.

I wondered what her sister looked like. I thought of asking why her sister was taking yoga, or why they were taking yoga, but didn’t because I feared they would ask me the same thing. I didn’t feel like sharing my story.

You can sit on the mats if you like,” I said, trying to be helpful. “You just need to take off your clothes... I mean your shoes.”

I was so embarrassed. I thought they were going to leave, call the police, or something. “I’m sorry. I didn’t mean...”

One of the girls interrupted: “It’s alright,” she smiled. They could see how embarrassed I was. The redness in my face probably contrasted really well with my white t- shirt. They just stood by the door and waited for Irene.

I pulled and adjusted my sock to see if I could get the hole someplace other than my toe. When you live a life of constant pain, these kinds of things happen. You miss seeing things like holes in your socks, or you say things you don’t mean to say. You’re so distracted all the time.

Irene came back. A few more people arrived. There were ten of us in the class, all girls except for me. They all wore tights, except for me. They all had bare feet, except for me. Irene didn’t mention anything to me about bare feet. I took off my socks and stuffed them into my pockets. My heels were sore and swollen. My back was painful. I was hoping yoga could help me. I sat and waited for Irene to start the class.

CHAPTER TWELVE

New Direction

Irene began her class by paraphrasing a famous quote by Woody Allen, “Success is eighty-percent showing up,” she said, then added, “If you learn nothing else from my classes, just remember that.”

I thought perhaps Irene was having difficulty keeping students. I thought maybe yoga was difficult and that if eighty-percent of it was just showing up, then twenty-percent must be causing her students to leave. I’d learn that “showing up” had a different meaning.

I went to evening classes twice a week, and worked at my father’s company during the day. I sold buttons to the textile industry, but business was becoming increasingly difficult because of competition from foreign imports. My clients called me the “button man,” an unintentional yet distracting reminder of my days as a child wearing creative halloween costumes. It was strange how such things could instantly cause an uncomfortable reaction, often without you realizing it. It was peculiar how a simple comment or circumstance could make me feel uncomfortable for no apparent reason.

I was spending a lot of my time learning and practicing yoga. My father was concerned about what I was doing with “that group” as he called it, and my mother... well she thought it was nice that I belonged to a group, but worried anyway.

At first I tried to explain yoga to my father, but this proved fruitless. The information didn’t fit within his frame of reference and wasn’t consistent with his life experiences. Perhaps I should have compared yoga to a boot camp, or to a balance sheet, but I didn’t. However, I did mention that the definition of yoga was “union,” to which my father responded, “So you’re in a union.”

“Yes,” I said.

This pleased him very much.

“Unions built America,” he would say.

So being in a union was a good thing. My mother was also pleased I was in a union, but worried just the same. My parents thought I was apprenticing in some

guild that helped people to get healthy, and so that was good. They also noticed that I was happier, which was an improvement.

Like learning anything, I suppose, there's a tendency to agree with information that is consistent with your own experiences and understanding, particularly if it can be applied to achieve a specific result. I was experiencing this with yoga.

When Irene talked about "showing up" what she meant was having your attention in the present. She meant that you must start, not from where you were, or where you would like to be, but from where you are now "Showing up" was not thinking about the past or the future. It was being aware of the present moment.

Of course, you have to remember things and plan things, which necessitates thinking of the past and future. But if this happens involuntarily, without any control, then it would be distracting. Irene talked about not being able to change the past, and that what happens in the future is dependent on what you thought and did in the present. It's makes sense to believe that your tomorrow is dependent on what you think and do today. At least to a certain extent. It made sense to me that I needed to be in the present because dwelling on my past would more than likely dictate my future, which wouldn't be a good thing since my past was so disastrous. This was interesting but also problematic. It was hard to focus my attention on anything regarding the present, other than on a painful part of my body or an unwanted feeling. This would only change if I was on narcotics, which would make me even less aware of the present. I was someone whose attention and awareness was not under my control. But in time I would discover I could change that.

At my first yoga class, Irene said: "You are awareness. You can't do much of anything unless you are aware." She then told us to sit comfortably and quietly on our mats. She instructed us to close our eyes and place our attention on our breathing.

"We want to empty the air from our lungs completely. Exhale through your nose while slowly and effortlessly pulling your abdomen inwards to expel all the air," she said.

I followed her instructions, expelling all the air out of my lungs. I didn't do this slowly, and I had no idea what my abdomen was doing. I inhaled through my mouth and started my exhale over again.

"Inhale through your nose slowly and smoothly. As you're doing this, be aware that your diaphragm is descending, your rib cage is expanding, and your chest is rising... slowly raise your shoulders and fill your lungs to seventy-five percent of their capacity... then briefly pause... and slowly exhale through your

nose... emptying your lungs... relaxing your shoulders, chest, diaphragm and abdomen.

“Let your breathing flow freely in and out. Focus your attention on the flow of air as it goes in and out of your body,” she said.

I inhaled air through my nose. It was a short and shallow breath. I didn't pause, and quickly exhaled. It was so quick that I didn't have time to focus. I opened my eyes and looked at Irene. She was sitting in front of us with her eyes closed, doing the breathing exercise. Her chest and shoulders slowly lifted and lowered. She looked relaxed, comfortable and peaceful. I knew I didn't look like that. I closed my eyes and tried the exercise again. I inhaled more deeply and could feel my body tightening. My back hurt. My shoulders were stiff. My feet hurt.

Irene was giving us more instructions. “While you're focused on your breathing, be aware of what is happening with you but don't dwell on or ignore anything. Don't try to understand or change anything. Just observe what is happening as it unfolds moment to moment. Continue to focus on your breathing and just let whatever happens pass through in its own time,” she said.

I focused on my breathing but it wasn't easy. I could feel the pain in my body. I opened my eyes and glanced around at the other students. They were breathing easier than me. I closed my eyes and refocused my attention on inhaling and exhaling. I could exhale okay but my inhale was too brief.

Irene was repeating her mantra. “Perceive anything you experience while you're experiencing it. Don't dwell upon anything or resist anything.”

I wasn't experiencing anything pleasant and I was trying to avoid feeling my pain. My body felt tense and not under my control. I thought to myself, “How do I pay attention to pain without resisting it?”

“Don't try to change anything. Just breathe through any tension, sensations, attitudes or emotions. Notice what's happening as it unfolds moment to moment. Continue to focus on your breathing and just let whatever occurs to pass through in its own time,” she said.

I continued focusing on my breathing. I tried not to resist my pain. I felt my feet throbbing, my back aching, but stayed focused on my breathing.

“Don't get stuck on any thoughts, see them as clouds and just let them float away while you return your attention to your breathing over and over again,” Irene said.

I kept trying. Then my attention shifted to something else. I felt tight in my stomach. It was constricted. I thought about trying to relax, to breathe more naturally. The tightness got worse and I had thoughts of sitting in a chair. I felt as though my brace was pushing into my stomach. I realized I didn't breathe

normally. My abdomen and stomach were extremely tight and my diaphragm was constricted. It had always been this way but I had no awareness of it. I held my breath for a moment before exhaling. I continued to focus. I visualized my thoughts as storm clouds that hovered overhead. I focused on my breathing, waiting for this storm to pass—and it did.

I'd never thought about my breathing before. I'd never purposely focused on the present, or let things move beyond my attention. I had this amazing feeling and I didn't want to stop this exercise. I found it impossible to worry about my life when I was so focused. It was like being on the inside looking out, rather than being on the outside trying to look in.

When the class ended, I drove home and focused my attention on the moment. I purposely tried to avoid thinking about anything from the past, or to worry or plan anything about the future. It seemed my thoughts about the past and the future were constantly infringing on my attempts to focus on the present. I felt anxious for no apparent reason. I noticed that my hands held the steering wheel in a tight death-grip. I held pens and pencils the same way. I probably always did this. I just wasn't aware of it. I just let these thoughts go. I realized that dwelling on my past, robbed me of time in the present. This fascinated me, especially since I was intrigued by the relationship between the way I thought and the way I felt.

I took a shower when I got home and stood under the spray, holding a bar of soap in one hand, and a washcloth in the other. My breath became short and shallow. I started automatically counting, while my hands robotically moved to the back of my neck. I stopped abruptly. I was following a memorized routine, a routine established years ago when I was in my brace. I would stand perfectly upright I would begin counting twenty-one areas of my body to wash. I wouldn't move my neck or torso. I would barely breathe. Only my arms and legs would move. I would start by washing my neck, and then I would go down my arms, counting off a number that corresponded with a part of my body.

I would wash each shoulder, underneath my arms, across my chest, until I got to my legs. I would lift my right leg to meet my hands, and then did the same with my left. I would do the same with each foot, all the time remaining perfectly straight, never bending my neck or torso, and here I was, many years later, doing the same thing without ever realizing what I was doing.

I was stuck in the past, following a pattern and routine that was so conditioned that it had become completely involuntary. I was not "showing up." I was absent. I was someplace else. I was purposely disengaged. It was like flying a plane on auto-pilot. I had memorized routines that would get me through the day. I was in the cockpit but I was mostly sleeping. I just never realized it.

For most people, I suppose, taking a shower is relaxing and comforting. It's cleansing and refreshing. But this wasn't the case for me. Instead of being relaxing, it was worrisome. Rather than feeling good, it felt uncomfortable. Instead of breathing while I moved, I would hold my breath. I was in a constant state of anxiety because I still felt fragile. But here I was many years later, no longer frail as I once was, without my brace, functioning as I did in the past, following a routine I had conditioned myself to follow.

What happened next may seem trivial, but for me, it was a life-changing experience. I broke the routine. I focused on the moment. I slowly inhaled and slowly exhaled. I observed. I began to selectively wash parts of my body. I randomly washed wherever I decided. I slowly bent, twisted, arched, sat, leaned and assumed all kinds of positions. I had a brief worry that maybe there would be some pain, but there was none. I continued my breathing and put as much attention as I could on the moment, on washing myself in the most unusual and awkward ways I could imagine. I laughed. I was so relaxed. A sense of calm and awareness engulfed me. I realized that this felt like the time when I threw that basketball to win the championship at Lake George. I was so focused at that moment.

Elite athletes often talk about being in a "zone" when they are at the peak of their performance. They describe it as complete attention on the moment, as if everything about them is totally devoted to an instant in time, every part of their body, every perception, every thought is in complete unison with the moment. That's why yoga is defined as "union". In this zone, there are no sensations, no pains, no doubts, fears, or unwanted emotions. There are no concerns about the past, or worries about the future, or the millions of things we think about in order to keep going.

In this zone, you are standing apart from all these distractions. The moment is viewed clearly with calmness and ease. You feel in total control and at your very best. It's at that moment that you are just—you.

The idea that I could experience an instant, where every part of my body, every perception, every thought, is in complete unison, focused entirely on the present without unwanted thoughts, emotions or physical discomfort, was amazing to me.

I discovered that breathing was one of the tools used to get into this zone. In yoga, to be aware of your breathing is to be in the present moment. No matter what any of us are doing at any given moment, we're all breathing. There may be a lot of other things going on, but our breathing is a present-time activity that we can experience at any given moment. From the moment we're born, we take our first breath, and then exhale, and this continues moment to moment for the

rest of our lives, ending with a final and last exhale. Our breath is an easy thing to focus our attention on.

I slept well that night and joined Sherri for breakfast the next morning. I was excited to share my experiences from the night before.

Sherri and I had moved into a small apartment together and as we sat at the kitchen table, I noticed the headlines on the front page of the morning paper. There was a story about a group of toddlers in a daycare center that were stabbed to death by a teenager, and another news story about a celebrity that had died from a prescription drug overdose.

“There’s never any good news,” I said.

“Well, I’m doing well and you’re doing better. That’s good news,” Sherri said cheerfully. “Maybe they should write about that?” she laughed.

“I doubt it,” I replied.

Sherri had to get going. I would have to wait until later to tell her about my experience. She had an early class at university where she was finishing her masters degree in science. As Sherri headed towards the door, her bag brushed along the kitchen table sweeping the newspaper onto the floor.

“I’ll get it,” I said.

Sherri gave me a big kiss.

“Love you. See you later,” she said, turning to leave.

“Love you. See you later,” I said.

I bent over to pick up scattered paper. I noticed that there was an advertisement at the bottom of the health section. It read: **“Do You Often Experience, Loneliness, Anxiety, Fatigue, Or Feel Distracted.”** Underneath the headline read the following: “If so, and you are not currently on medication, you may qualify for a clinical study.” At the bottom there was information on how to contact a university mental health institute.

“Who doesn’t have these problems?” I thought. The advertisement reminded me of the Aldus Huxley novel, “Brave New World”, where every citizen is encouraged to consume a hallucinogenic drug called “soma” so they could enjoy hangover-free vacations. Given the severity of the problems associated with narcotics, I thought there should be more advertisements about prevention, or at least, a place in our neighbourhoods where we could receive effective drug rehabilitation. But we rarely see these places because they’re scarce.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Narcotics

According to the National Institute on Drug Abuse, there are 16.3 million Americans, over twelve years of age, who took prescription narcotics in 2007. In that same year, 19.9 million Americans, over twelve, took non-prescription narcotics.

I found there were groups of physicians against such things as nuclear weapons, landmines, violence, smoking, global warming, hunger, and poverty. All good causes. I also found groups of physicians supportive of peace, human rights, and available health care. All good causes. But I couldn't find a group of physicians against drug abuse and addiction. I suppose, I would have a better chance of trying to find a group of oil refineries who were against the use of fossil fuels.

In fact, narcotic addiction has been redefined by the medical profession as a disease much like cancer, diabetes, arteriosclerosis or arthritis. This definition supports a theory that addiction is hereditary². In other words, if someone has an addiction it is because of their genes.

Ironically, according to a University of Florida study, physicians were five times more likely to be addicted to prescription narcotics than the general public.³ I wondered if this meant physicians were five times more susceptible to having this genetic disease? Or does it mean they're five times more likely to have an addiction because they have a greater access to narcotics? According to a series of articles in the *Washington Post*, entitled *Medical Boards Let Physicians Practice Despite Drug Abuse*, this disease, or addiction, is not something that should affect a physician's ability to practice medicine.⁴ It is, after all, not their fault. It's no different, I suppose, than restricting a physician's ability to practice medicine because he, or she, suffers from arthritis. They are just unfortunate victims. This kind of logic reminds me of the tobacco industry.

We know tobacco executives, scientists, medical experts, and politicians, knowingly circumvented the truth about the harmful effects of smoking.⁵

Smoking was good for you, it benefited your health, calmed your nerves, increased energy, improved mental focus, reduced muscle tension, helped you lose weight, eliminated stress, and so on. The experts told us so. Their advertising told us so. Their science and clinical research told us so. The problem was—it wasn't true. Nevertheless, they had users who would provide testimonials on how much better smoking made them feel. But isn't that why we take narcotics—to feel good? The problem is—it's not good for you.

The model for marketing narcotics also exists in the historical record of pharmaceutical companies. During the early 19th century drug manufacturers earned massive profits from selling cocaine.⁶ Cocaine was present in everything from toothpaste to headache tablets. Selling cocaine was so lucrative and the profits so astounding that drugstore owner, John Pemberton, decided to include the narcotic in a carbonated soft drink called Coca-Cola. Pharmaceutical companies sold cocaine for many decades before public outrage forced governments to prohibit its sale.

Marketing narcotics today is very different than in the past. Although essentially anaesthetics, narcotics are often pitched as treatments for disorders that arguably don't exist. For example, "methylphenidate" has pharmacological effects that are similar to cocaine and amphetamines.⁷ This narcotic was marketed in the 1960s as a treatment for hyperactive children, defined as children suffering from "minimal brain dysfunction" or "minimal brain damage." In 1987 this condition was renamed as "attention deficit hyperactivity disorder," and given the acronym ADHD or ADD.

Prescriptions for methylphenidate increased significantly once mental health practitioners began diagnosing children with this disorder. Controversy arose when scientists began questioning the existence of the disorder. They claim ADD is a myth, and that children diagnosed with the disorder have no brain dysfunctions or neurological deficits.⁸

Richard Bromfield, is a Ph.D. and psychologist on the faculty of Harvard Medical School who specializes in child and adolescent behaviour. He claims that methylphenidate is frequently prescribed because it is a convenient and fast solution to calming children who are upset due to ordinary causes (such as abusive parenting, bullying at school, or too much sugar in their diet) rather than any neurological disorder.^{9, 10}

Narcotics are frequently marketed as "brain disorder" treatments. For example, antidepressants are prescribed as solutions for numbing unwanted emotions (moods), such as grief, anxiety, apathy, worry, sadness, fear and general unhappiness. These unwanted emotions are then diagnosed as brain

disorders, which in turn provides justification for prescribing a narcotic as “treatment”.

The problem with this, of course, is that chemicals are not happiness, and unhappiness doesn't mean you have a brain disorder. But once the narcotic is prescribed, it becomes a problem because the individual subsequently manifests symptoms that are related to being on drugs. Studies have shown that antidepressants do nothing more than get people to consume narcotics.¹¹

A study by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, found that antidepressants have become the most prescribed drug in the United States. In 2005, the most recent year for prescription statistics, there were 118 million prescriptions given for antidepressants.¹² In 2004, revenues from antidepressants exceeded 13 billion dollars annually¹³.

According to Dr. Robert Goodman, an Internist in New York City, the skyrocketing prescription rates are a result of pharmaceutical marketing. He points out that the marketing strategy uses direct advertising to encourage the public to request drugs from their family physicians. Studies have shown that this has been extremely effective in increasing prescription rates for narcotics.

¹⁴Dr. Ronald Dworkin, an anesthesiologist at the Greater Baltimore Medical Center and a fellow at Washington's Hudson Institute, claims the large user rate is because family physicians, instead of psychiatrists, are providing 75% of the antidepressant prescriptions¹⁵. Ironically, this raises the following question: “Why are family physicians prescribing narcotics for brain disorders that many experts claim don't exist?”

A study published in the Journal of the American Medical Association may shed some light on this issue. Actors were hired to visit physicians in San Francisco. The actors pretended to be depressed. The study found that those actors who asked for antidepressants were significantly more likely to get them than those who did not.¹⁶

These results infer that if you want antidepressants, all you need to do is ask for them. The only requisite, is that you appear unhappy.

Dr. Dworkin points out that what's alarming about the medical profession is their need to define happiness as a biochemical condition, and unhappiness as a disease, and that's how mood-altering and thought-altering narcotics can be marketed. He believes we should be teaching people how to effect positive change in their lives instead of drugging them. What he finds particularly repugnant is that children are targeted with these narcotics^{17, 18}

Marketing narcotics continues to be controversial and pharmaceutical companies in recent years have been the target of numerous health care fraud

investigations, fines and [19](#)lawsuits²⁰ [21](#)

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

The Zone

Although I was still suffering pain and stress, I was hopeful I could change. Since returning from France, I had the desire, and the will to change, but needed a direction to follow. I was looking for a way out. I was looking for a bridge that would take me away from the troubled waters that encircled and entrapped me. If I could only find this bridge, then I was certain that it would take me to a better place. Yoga was that bridge.

I started walking across this bridge, slowly moving step by step. I could see the other side in the distance. I imagined that this other side was a perfect world. I just needed to keep moving.

Over time I would learn that this bridge I was travelling didn't take me to a perfect world. I discovered that a perfect world didn't exist and that absolutes were not attainable. Instead, I found that this bridge was arched and that the highest point was in the middle. I could stand there, and have a panoramic view that extended far away. I could see the lay of the land on both sides, and I could see how this bridge connected them together. I could watch everything moving below and I could see the traffic moving back and forth. I could see how everything interacted and how these interactions created continuous change. I could see how this change could be good or bad.

Practicing yoga is like visiting the middle of this bridge. It is a place from which you have a panoramic view, a place where you can focus your attention at any given moment and be aware of what's happening with you.

In yoga, your breathing is synchronized with physical movement (postures) to help you understand what is going on with your body, thoughts, and emotions, so you are aware of how they interact with one another.

Before, when I worried about the future, or recalled something unpleasant about the past, this would create unwanted feelings of anxiety, anger or sadness. These emotions would cause my back muscles to tense, and the constrictions would cause my breathing to become quick and shallow. There would be less oxygen going into my body. The unwanted feelings would get worse and my

muscles would tighten, my breathing would become more laboured, and everything would deteriorate.

Now, when I worry, or feel anxious, I close my eyes. I focus on my breathing and become aware of the present. It's like going to that place on that bridge. I can see everything that's happening to me. I don't dwell on anything I don't analyse anything. I don't get lost in a train of thought. I don't try to resist anything. I don't allow myself to be consumed by any one emotion or feeling. I would just observe.

I could see how unpleasant thoughts about the past, or future, created unwanted emotions and how these emotions affected my body. Yet, in that present moment there is no anxiety, anger or sadness. They don't exist. These were recreated from thoughts of my past, or being manifested from thoughts about my future. But the past is history and the future isn't here yet. There's no reason for these things to be part of the present moment. They shouldn't exist.

My breathing would become smooth and fluid. The tension in my muscles would relax. The constriction in my body disappeared. There were no unwanted emotions or stress. I was comfortable, content, alert and aware.

I would open my eyes. The worries about my future and the unpleasant emotions of my past had dissipated. I had to think of things, but there was no rule book that required me to cripple myself first, or to make myself sick with worry, anger or sadness. I couldn't change my past, and the future didn't yet exist. My future depended upon what I thought, and did, in the present.

In time, I would learn that I could change how I was feeling. I could focus on my breathing and shift my attention. Instead of reacting to things, I could choose my response. I would appreciate what I have, what I value, and what is beautiful in my life.

A teacher once told me, "When we are grateful for something in our life, we do feel great." I have found that thinking like this could create pleasant emotions that were soothing and relaxing.

In this way, I could influence what was happening with my emotions and with my body, at any given moment. I could become calm and serene, more aware and alert. It reminded me of what Rudolph Giuliani once said: "My father used to say to me: 'Whenever you get into a jam, whenever you get into a crisis or an emergency... become the calmest person in the room and you'll be able to figure your way out of it.' "

I remember a time when I was in an apartment elevator. I was alone. I was going down fourteen stories when the elevator suddenly jerked and stopped. The lights went off. There was dead silence. A torrent of thoughts, feelings, urges and sensations raced through me. My stomach and back muscles became tense.

My neck was stiff. My breathing quickened. My pulse accelerated. I felt afraid and desperate. This all happened in a matter of seconds.

I focused on my breathing, just like I did in my yoga classes. I kept my eyes open despite the darkness. I could feel my heart pounding. I moved towards the doors and tried to open them with my hands. They wouldn't move. The only thing I could do was control what was happening with me. I stayed focused on my breathing. My attention was on the present moment. There was nothing happening with this elevator. It was just stationary. But there was a lot going on with me.

I slowed my breathing. I focused on the moment. A brief image of me falling from a tree came to mind, and the thought of someone saying: "I told you to get down, you never listen." It was subtle and quick, flashing by and disappearing. Then another flew by... a childhood memory of being stuck in a closet and the feelings of being trapped. I felt a brief urge for a tranquilizer. I kept focused on my breathing. There were a lot of things happening with me. There was a lot of noise beneath the surface. I didn't react to this noise. I didn't dwell on it, or resist it. I just acknowledged its existence and focused on my breathing. Slowly my muscles started to relax. My unwanted feelings began to subside. I felt calmer. Then I heard a click.

The lights came on. The elevator began to move. I pressed the button for the next floor. The elevator stopped. The doors opened and I walked out. I later learned there was a power outage and the generator did not immediately engage because of a faulty switch.

Before discovering yoga, an incident such as this would cause me pain and stress for days. It would eventually escalate to anger. I would be hostile towards the elevator and the building owners for causing me all this pain and stress. I would most likely make a complaint and file a grievance with some safety authority. I wouldn't do these things because of concern for my safety, but because I wanted to avenge my pain and suffering. I would tell my horrible experience to everyone and would expect sympathy in return.

In yoga, I have learned to choose my response rather than follow an involuntary reaction. I have learned that it is better to take responsibility for myself rather than blame something else. I have learned that my thoughts can cause a chain reaction of events that can predispose me to conditions. I've seen this so often that it has become profoundly liberating to know that I'm the master of my thoughts and feelings and can influence them.

I've become more aware of what is happening with me. For example, my feet. My body adjusted to compensate for the burden of wearing my heavy brace. As a result, my weight was centered over the back of my heels, as the podiatrist had

told me. But he also told me that I couldn't change my balance because my structure was abnormal. This was incorrect I could change it. There were thoughts of being frail, being a victim, being back on my heels. There was noise beneath the surface. But I knew that where my attention goes—energy flows, and that function influences structure. I eventually influenced my condition using yoga and my body now moves with proper balance. And my feet? They feel great!

One day, Sherri gave me a book that she insisted I read. It was not about yoga. It was about a man, Viktor Frankl, who was imprisoned in Nazi concentration camps including Auschwitz.²² Frankl, his wife, as well as his parents and other family members were transported to these camps. He was the only one who survived. Frankl describes the unimaginable atrocities in those camps. He tells us about the dehumanizing of life—the torture, brutality, forced labor, deprivation, gas chambers and death. Every conceivable atrocity that could be inflicted upon another, and every conceivable means to debase and defile a human being went on within those camps. But Frankl's insights into human behaviour, under such horrific conditions, is his great legacy.

Viktor Frankl was a psychiatrist and neurologist who specialized in depression and suicide. In these camps, he witnessed prisoners becoming barbaric or suicidal. But he also observed prisoners that were kind, courageous and hopeful. He noted that despite the conditions common to all, some would react one way, while others would do the opposite. He surmised that how a person reacted depended on their response and not on the conditions they were living in. He gave sufficient evidence that no matter how deprived an individual may be, there is one thing that cannot be taken away—their freedom to choose their response in any given set of circumstances. What a person became, had more to do with their inner decisions rather than the result of outside influences.

People don't wake up in the morning and say: "Today, I'm going to think about things that will make me angry, upset, heartbroken, sad, depressed, nervous, anxious and frantic." But after they read the newspaper, watch the news, check their mail, log onto their computer, drive to work get the children ready for school, or whatever their daily routine might be; everyone will be challenged to react in a manner that may be uncomfortable and undesirable.

However, if at any given moment a person could change this, then at the very least, they give themselves a choice and a means of control, instead of an involuntary reaction and a feeling of powerlessness.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Pursuing Yoga

I began enrolling in classes with other instructors to expand my knowledge and understanding of yoga. On occasion, I would also teach classes. One day, an instructor asked whether I would be interested in teaching yoga to young children between the ages of 6 and 7. There was an elementary school with a yoga program and they needed to replace their instructor who was moving to another city. The classes were forty-five minutes long, once a week, with sixteen children.

I reviewed the program and felt it was designed more for adults than young kids. I remembered as a child at camp, how activities were always fun and playful. I thought these classes should be fun for the children. I decided to take the job and arranged my schedule to accommodate the classes. There were only a few months left in the school year and I committed to teaching the program until then.

During my first class with the children, I asked them to inhale and exhale. Then I gathered them around a table with a glass of water on it. “We need air, just like we need food and water. I’m going to show you how the air works,” I told them. I placed a drop of beet juice into the glass and asked them to notice the juice.

“What do you see happening?” I asked.

“It’s spreading around,” one replied.

“It’s turning the water all red,” pointed out another.

“You’re both right,” I said. “This glass of water is like our bodies.”

“My mom says we’re mostly water,” one of the kids interjected.

“She’s right and this juice is like the air coming into our bodies. But we always need fresh air just like we always need to eat and drink. So we replace the air by breathing out and breathing back in again. That’s how we keep lots of fresh air in us.

“Let’s go on an adventure,” I said. Let’s pretend we’re standing on a beach at the ocean. Feel the sand with our feet,” I said, shuffling my feet. The children

moved their feet in the make-believe sand.

“Let’s walk into the water. Let’s walk until the water comes up to our waist. Feel the water coming up your legs,” I told them. The children pretended to be walking into the water.

“Okay. Let’s get some fresh air. Breathe in through your nose,” I instructed while inhaling, “And breathe out through your nose.” The kids inhaled and exhaled.

“Stretch your arms out to the side like this,” I said, stretching my arms out and lowering them waist high.

“Splash the water with your hands. Splash. Splash.” The children started splashing.

“Let’s go back to the beach. Look! There’s a big palm tree,” I imagined, and pointed, “Let’s be the tree. Put your feet together. Breathe in. Stretch your arms up over your head. Wiggle your fingers like they’re the leaves. Breathe out. Sit down on the beach...” and we continued the adventure until the class ended.

I learned some things teaching these children. I learned that most breathe more naturally than many adults. I also learned that it is better to teach yoga so that it is fun. Yoga isn’t about stretching, working out, or having a perfect body. It’s about self-awareness and discovery. That’s why it’s an adventure. That’s why it should be enjoyable. I finished the school program and was invited back for the following year. I accepted the offer and looked forward to returning in the fall.

I decided to continue my studies by spending the summer at a yoga center in Western Massachusetts to obtain a teaching certification.

When I phoned to register for the program I was asked whether I’d like a private or shared room. The cost for a private room was a lot more, so I decided to share. I was then asked if I snored. I said, ‘No. I don’t snore.’ But Sherri overheard me and yelled: “You do so!” This sparked a debate over the definition of snoring between Sherri and I, while the woman on the phone was kept waiting.

“Eric! Eric! Are you there?” she shouted. I quickly brought the phone back up to my head.

“Yes, I’m sorry.”

“I’ll register you as a snorer, which means you’ll share a room with another snorer,” she said. “But I don’t snore!” I objected, shaking my head as I looked over at Sherri. Sherri nodded back, then opened her mouth, sucked air through her nose, and made a loud obnoxious snort.

I could hear muted laughter at the other end of the phone and then the woman politely added: “We can place you with a non-snorer if it turns out that you don’t

really snore. Does that sound fair?”

“Okay,” I replied.

After we finished with the registration, I hung up. I closed my eyes and focused on my breathing.

“Are you upset?” Sherri asked.

“Give me just a moment,” I said, continuing my breathing.

“But you snore, Eric. If you go there and share a room with a non-snorers, you’ll disturb their sleep. I’m used to it, but it might bother somebody else.”

“Just give me a moment,” I repeated. Sherri gave me my moment and waited. After five minutes I opened my eyes.

“You’re right, Sherri,” I told her. “I snore, but I don’t snort.” “No, you don’t snort,” she smiled, giving me a hug.

“You sounded like a pig. It was horrible,” I told her.

“I’m sorry sweetie. Do you want me to call them back and tell them you don’t snort like a pig?” she teased.

“No, it’s okay. If they have ‘snorts like a pig’ written beside my name, I’ll have them call you.”

At the yoga center, I was checked into a double occupancy “snorers” room. I was by myself and anticipated the arrival of my roommate. But nobody came that day. The following morning, after breakfast, I went to the reservations desk to ask about the arrival of my roommate.

“Let me check that for you, Mr. Peters,” said the young man at the desk, tapping a keyboard to access the information on his computer. “There is no other person scheduled for that room,” he said. “Were you expecting someone?”

After a brief discussion, and some further checking, the young man told me I was the only snorer at the center. This meant I would have the room to myself unless another snorer registered. Fortunately, that day never came and I ended up having the room to myself at no additional cost. Initially, I was perplexed over why I was the only snorer at the retreat, but found out that this wasn’t unusual. It was just how things worked out.

The yoga center consisted of various buildings spread over an expansive estate in the Berkshire Mountains. From the grounds, you could see mansions sprinkled among the distant hilltops. The yellow, red and orange colors stood out along a blue horizon. You could see the little red house where Nathaniel Hawthorne wrote his famous book ‘Tanglewood Tales’, and the summer campus of the Boston Symphony Orchestra. It was a beautiful place in a region noted for its visual and performing arts, such as the Norman Rockwell Museum, the Massachusetts Museum of Contemporary Art and the Clark Art Institute, among many others.

The serenity of the mountains was a sharp contrast to the intensity of the yoga program. It was common to practice yoga for hours each day. The schedule was designed to take you to an extreme, to an edge, pushing the envelope to find your physical and emotional limits. It was like churning up an ocean floor to see what came to the surface. It was demanding and challenging.

I recall feeling tremendous anger that was bottled up inside me, held like a clenched fist for so many years, and the wonderful feeling of freedom I felt when I just let it go. I think I had a lot more anger than I was willing to admit. I learned to let it go rather than fight it. I could let it pass like a wave that would just disappear into a shoreline. My response was not to resist the wave, but to ride over it and let it pass.

After my training, I was invited to teach yoga at another elementary school. I accepted the position and was now teaching at two elementary schools. Soon after, I began teaching classes to seniors at a community center.

A volunteer at the community center happened to be a bank manager. She asked if I would teach yoga to her staff, which I did, and this eventually led to teaching at more banks. The bank staff would refer me to their friends, and this led to teaching private classes. With all these students, I decided to become a full-time yoga teacher.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Embracing Yoga

There are different explanations for yoga and several styles of practice, but the basic theory on how and why it works has remained the same for thousands of years. My explanation is not someone else's explanation. I can only explain yoga from my own perspective, based on my own experiences. I've learned that yoga is not about stretching, doing exercise, or perfecting unusual postures. It's not about attaining a perfect body, living a perfect lifestyle, or arriving at Utopia through meditation.

Yoga is a way to learn about yourself. This may seem like a strange statement because I think most of us think we know ourselves fairly well. Perhaps some of us do. But learning about yourself doesn't necessarily mean knowing what you like or don't like, want to have or not have. There's more to it than that.

If you're going to learn about yourself, you have to place your attention on yourself. In doing so, you have to be fully present so you can observe what's going on. As an analogy, it wouldn't be a good idea to take alcohol or drugs and then operate a chain saw, or drive a car, because you would be less aware. When you're less aware, you're less able to respond to what's happening at any given moment.

In yoga, there is more emphasis placed on your breathing. This isn't only because correct breathing has physiological benefits, but because it initiates and sustains the process of becoming fully present and aware of what's happening with yourself.

In yoga, we're interested in observing how thinking affects our body and how our body affects our thinking. This is based on the principle that everything exists as an opposite of something else. Black is opposite to white, day to night, left to right, soft to hard, male to female, hot to cold, pain to pleasure, love to hate, rich to poor, life to death, and so on. Nothing exists without an opposite because you can't define one without the other. They define, interact and relate to one another. In other words, hot is understood only in relation to cold. They

cannot exist in isolation.

This means that if one exists, so must the other. A deficiency of one, implies the excess of the other. They interact in order to maintain a symmetrical, reciprocal relationship. When this interaction is symmetrical it is considered normal, balanced, functional, and in harmony. If it isn't, it is abnormal, unbalanced, dysfunctional and in disharmony to the way things are supposed to be.

We observe what's going on between our thoughts and our body so we may discover how they interact. This allows us to choose our response to what's happening with us in any given circumstance.

I had a student who was suffering from carpal tunnel syndrome, a medical condition where the median nerve is compressed at the wrist, leading to tingling sensations, numbness and muscle weakness in the hand. She worked at a computer and her thinking was mostly preoccupied with worry, which caused her to be frequently anxious. Anxiety is an emotion of “preventing” or “stopping” something. The muscles in her neck and shoulders were tense. Under these circumstances the body restricts the breathing pattern, so she would take short, shallow breaths. Anxiety also causes people to hold their breath frequently. She would sit bent forward in her chair so that her ribs, abdomen and chest could not expand or contract properly. The upper arms would rotate inwards, with her elbows outwards, and her wrists turned in. As she worked she would stay in this position for extended periods of time. She would seem motionless as though she was “preventing” or “stopping” herself from moving. As a result, her wrists were locked in an awkward position on her keyboard.

Once she began practicing yoga, she became more aware of what was happening. She was able to respond and change her condition. It's like changing your mind from thinking one way to thinking in another way. Now she no longer suffers from carpal tunnel syndrome.

That's why yoga is so effective. It makes you aware.

I find that most people, are able to resolve a difficulty if they're aware of the cause and effect, and have a means by which they can change it. This is why narcotics are so harmful. They take you in an opposite direction—less awareness.

Just as thoughts can affect your body, your body can affect your thoughts. Breathing, for example, can affect the way you think. The average person can go without food for several weeks; without liquid for several days. But breathing is a completely different matter. If you stop breathing, within minutes—you die.

A middle-aged woman contacted me because she was suffering from anxiety. Her doctor was reluctant to prescribe medication and suggested that she try

yoga. We arranged to meet and I noticed that her breathing was so restricted that her abdomen and chest barely moved. When we breathe our spines move in a snake-like, wave-like motion, but hers didn't. She reminded me of the time when I was encased in my back brace. She was so rigid.

I taught her a breathing exercise. I had her lie down on the floor with her knees bent, focusing her attention on inhaling and exhaling. I had her notice how her lower back arched slightly when she breathed in, and how it flattened when she breathed out. I had her visualize her pelvis as the face of a clock, with six o'clock at the top of her pelvis where it joins her spine, and twelve o'clock at the bottom near her coccyx (tailbone). As she inhaled and slightly arched her back, she would feel her pelvis rolling straight down toward the twelve o'clock position. As she exhaled and flattened her back, she would feel her pelvis rolling up to the six o'clock position. She repeated this exercise, focusing on her breathing.

She began experiencing feelings of sadness. She told me she was having thoughts about her mother who had died a few years ago. It was a tragic event and she anguished over the loss. As she continued the breathing exercise, she continued to think about her mother. At times, her anxiety would intensify. She would just let it pass. She focused on her breathing and the motion of her pelvis. Slowly she relaxed and her feelings of anxiety subsided. She felt better and realized that her body had been tight and rigid since the death of her mother. She became aware that her thoughts, emotions, physical tension and breathing were connected and interactive. Over the next few days, she improved her breathing and the fluidity of her movements. She was doing well and I suggested she practice a short routine (15-20 minutes daily) at home.

"It's good to do a little every day, so it becomes a part of your life. Then you can join one or two classes a week to perfect your practice," I told her. A few weeks later I received a call from her.

"I've never felt this great in years!" she told me.

Correct breathing has a direct and immediate influence on anxiety. Since yesterday, at this time, you have taken perhaps twenty thousand breaths and in your lifetime you will take more than a hundred million. We usually take our breathing for granted because it's automatic. But it's a valuable function we can control to our benefit.

Although we can breathe through our mouth, it mainly functions as part of our digestive system for consuming food and drink. When we're breathing correctly, air is inhaled and exhaled through our nose, which is specially designed for this purpose.

Our nose hair filters particles from the air. Olfactory receptors can

distinguish the concentration of odours and air quality. When we exhale through our nose, moisture is deposited on the mucous membrane in our nostrils.

When we inhale, the air temperature is adjusted and humidified as it travels through the hairs and over the mucus membrane. This acclimatizes the air for our body. The air travels to the top of our nose and enters a narrow passage. This passage brings the air towards the trachea. The mucous membrane in the nasal cavity runs the length of our trachea all the way down our bronchial tubes to our lungs. This membrane has thousands of hair like structures called cilia, which trap particles and microbes. The mucus contains white blood cells, which provide a gauntlet of immune-system barriers to invading microbes and viruses.

Viruses and microbes are anaerobic. This means they thrive in low oxygen environments. If you increase the oxygen environment around them, they will die.

Once the air reaches our bronchial tubes it then goes into successively smaller passages called the bronchi, and the bronchioles, until it reaches tiny sacs in our lungs called alveoli. Named from grapes, because they come in clusters, the alveoli pass oxygen into your blood while the blood passes carbon dioxide back into the alveoli. Oxygenated blood heads toward the heart to be pumped throughout the body to the cells, which burn the oxygen. When we exhale, we release the carbon dioxide, as well as nitrogen, oxygen, water vapour and other gases. These are exhaust emissions from your body, which would poison you if they were not exhaled.

While lying down, the number of complete breaths you will take is about thirteen per minute. During this time about 2 gallons (eight litres) of air will be inhaled. While sitting up, the number of breaths will increase to inhale about 4 gallons (16 litres) of air. While jogging, the air requirement will increase to about 13 gallons (50 litres) of air per minute. Although physical exercise increases the intake of air, it will burn oxygen in the body faster and inhibits the absorption required.

If you improved the quality of your breathing you would substantially increase efficiency. If you increased your breathing by 5% it would mean that with every twenty breaths, you would gain an additional lungful of oxygen. By the end of a day, you would have increased efficiency a thousand fold.

I had a student who suffered from asthma. I taught him how to breathe and how to observe and respond to what was happening with him at any given moment. He noticed that he would hold his breath if he felt anxious. He realized that when his anxiety intensified—his air passages would constrict and inflame. With practice he learned how to respond to this situation by controlling his breathing. He told me that when he took control, the anxiety dissipated within

seconds and his breathing would normalize. But even more amazing was the fact that he could do the complete opposite. He could constrict his breathing and induce the exact same feeling of anxiety within seconds.

All difficulties have negative emotions that will restrict movement and flexibility.

I remember an elderly woman who told me she couldn't do yoga because she had arthritis. She had tremendous pain in her knees. I taught her how to breathe, how to choose her response, and how to increase the range of motion in her muscles and joints. She is now in her late seventies—and is pain free.

A doctor referred to me a young girl who had been in a car accident. She couldn't move her neck or back without experiencing pain. After giving her some instruction, her pain disappeared. But what excited her even more was the discovery that yoga was a way to improve her own health.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Be Happy

It's been over twenty years since Dr. Backman first recommended yoga to me based on a relatively obscure article he read in a medical journal. But since that time there have been dozens of scientific studies published in major medical journals that validate the benefits of yoga.

According to a study at the Columbia College of Physicians and Surgeons, yoga breathing was found to be an effective treatment for stress, anxiety, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), depression, stress-related medical illnesses, and substance abuse.²³ Another scientific study conducted in Germany found yoga significantly and rapidly reduced anxiety and stress.²⁴

The West Virginia University School of Medicine conducted a study on the effectiveness of yoga for lower back pain and discovered that it reduced pain intensity by (64%), narcotic usage by (88%), and improved function by (77%)²⁵.

A pilot study at the Richard Stockton College of New Jersey found that yoga improved balance and flexibility, and significantly decreased disability and depression for those suffering from chronic lower back pain.²⁶ Further studies have found yoga to be an effective treatment for chronic illnesses, for increasing energy, muscle strength and cardio-respiratory endurance.²⁷

Practicing yoga doesn't require any special equipment or a location. It's something that I teach my students to do anywhere at anytime. It doesn't require them to close their eyes. Whether they're waiting to be served, working on a computer, waiting in traffic, on a bus, in a taxi, train, plane, or elevator, they can take control of themselves in that moment. What I find beneficial is taking moments throughout the day to check on how things are going. I find this extremely rejuvenating.

When I think back to my childhood, when I played that basketball game, I was in a moment that separated me from my pain and stress. It felt as though I was detached from my body, from my physical pain and undesirable emotions.

Yet, I was fully aware of the moment.

Through yoga, I've come to realize that I'm indeed separate from my parts. I'm not any one piece, or all of the pieces. To think otherwise abandons the single most important truth upon which all things are possible—you can be in control.

Yoga has changed my life. Now I control the pieces instead of the pieces controlling me. My hope is that my story may inspire you to do the same.

"How did you do that?" my dentist asked.

"Yoga," I replied. "You don't feel any pain?"

"No, I don't," I told him. I had a cavity drilled out of my tooth without having an anaesthetic. Now, normally a dentist wouldn't allow you to do such thing, but this dentist was my good natured brother-in-law.

"I can't believe you did that. What else can you do Eric?"

"Float in the air," I said.

"Come on!", he responded.

"I'm kidding. But I'm definitely out of my cage."



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