

YOGATM MAGAZINE

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HOW YOGA HELPED ME HEAL AFTER LOSS

Words: Kathryn Ashworth

Everyone deserves to be seen and loved. For various reasons, none of which are pertinent now, when I was 16, I so desperately did not. It's not uncommon of course for a teenager to feel lost, unheard and a general ache. Mine was deep. Then I met someone on a bench, outside of my high school cafeteria who made that feeling disappear just through their presence. To this day, I don't know why the connection we had was as intense as it was. (Was it past lives? fate?) A mere four months or so later, he was killed by one of our classmates. A random act of gun violence, so common in America. This changed so many lives irrevocably. It changed mine.

When I was asked to write the essay for the upcoming book *Embodied Resilience*, I struggled to put my story into words. I wrote so many drafts. I

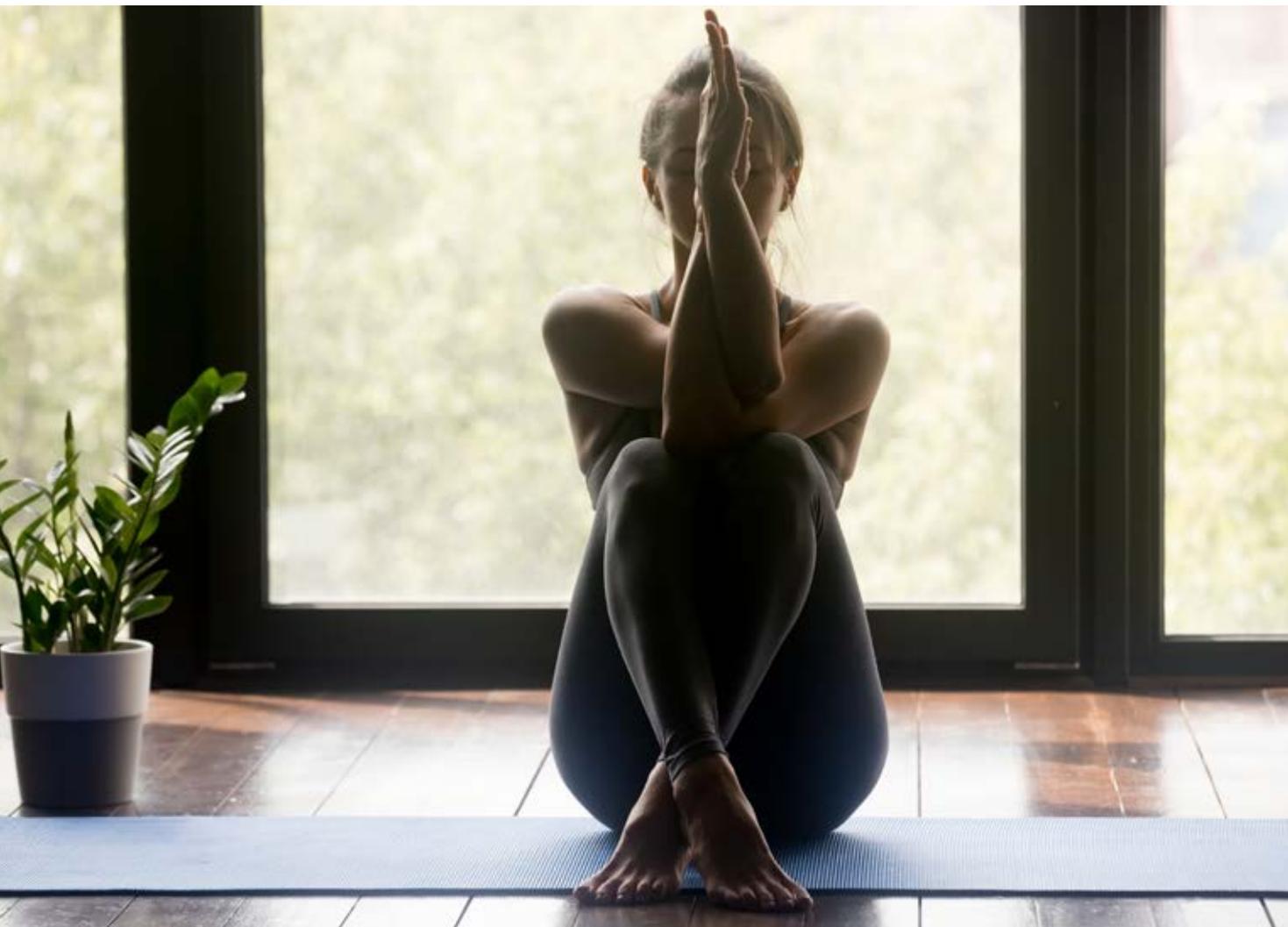
was afraid to be vulnerable up until the last one because grief is so hard to talk about. But the more that we share our stories, the more we heal. The more others feel seen and heard.

That is what this upcoming book is about: sharing the stories that formed us.

I am learning to be here after loss, after innocence is lost, when the order of things is stripped away. And yoga has been my aid. Through it, I have had to learn how to be that loving, kind presence for myself. It's something I approach every day with baby steps and it isn't easy. But it starts with something very simple: unrolling my mat. Then I lay down on my back, and I breathe. I breathe until I feel my breath become smooth and effortless, as though I am being breathed. This breath fills me.

That could be my entire practice. But often it's not. From there I let my body guide me through simple poses—cat cow to unwind my heart and hips, child's pose to surrender, down dog to lengthen, core and pelvic floor practices to explore my strength and so on — just to feel all of these things and so much more. I don't do yoga to become measurably stronger physically. I run and go to barre classes for muscle. I do yoga to come into being. Into a feeling that I am really here, I am really loved, and something about the breath and releasing effort teaches this to me.

I found this gentle practice by becoming a yoga teacher. That's right, you heard me correctly. It was completely and utterly backwards. The fact is, at 25, eight years after my friend was murdered, I still carried that dull



ache of wanting to find somewhere — some people with whom— I belonged. You can read more about how I ended up at the yoga studio where I took my training in the book itself, but the short of it is I walked into that place thinking I was entering a free community class. To my surprise, it was instead a yoga teacher training informational session. Up until that point I had been doing hot yoga, a practice very different from the yoga I do now. Maybe I could see the gentleness in the eyes of the teacher who held this informational session; a gentleness that came from her practice. Maybe that's what sucked me in. I signed up for that training that day. Through it, my vision of yoga and healing would change.

Let me explain that my aim in practicing hot yoga, was to avoid

being present. I see that now, but of course at the time I couldn't have known. People don't hurt themselves on purpose; there's an unconscious drive that asks them to push themselves harder, to go beyond their limits. It usually has to do with some original unresolved pain. But that's what I did in those sweaty classes. I made myself stay in the 105 degree room, even when I felt nauseous. I did my very best to reach for the ballet barre behind me when the teacher told us to "reach for the barre" in standing backbends. (Though I don't think she was being literal.) It was an impossible goal for my spine, but I knew that once I felt that uncomfortable twinge in my lower back I'd done 'enough.' I was getting closer.

Discomfort was a sign, for me, of progress. But progress towards what? I don't think I had defined that yet. I think I just wanted to feel like I was enough. Like I had arrived somewhere. Like I belonged to myself. Now enough means something very different to me. I had a very vague understanding of it before that was wrapped around doing more. But gradually, over time, the writer and editor in me wanted to clearly define it. What does it really mean to be enough? Why don't I feel it's truly attainable? What could I do to make that feeling come alive within myself? What isn't working? What will?

Outside of the Oxford Dictionary, or any other standardized way of approaching a word's meaning,

everyone will come to their own unique feeling, understanding, grasping of a word. To me, enough means knowing that I don't have to do anything in particular to be loved. This now translates through my body as a deep listening to my needs. Resting when I need to rest, striving when I need to strive (in a healthy and meaningful way), and allowing myself to be within my comfort zone as I grow. If I hadn't stumbled into that teacher training, I may have come to this clear definition by another means, at another time, but I am also not sure.

Ultimately, we come to yoga to become our own teachers. Looking back, perhaps that is really what this teacher training meant for me: awakening the teacher that lives within. That feeling that I don't belong anywhere began to fade the day I learned about *Savasana* and meditation and all of the "quieter" aspects of yoga—the day this inner teacher began to awaken.

The teacher training took nine months. We met once a month to share how we were digesting what we learned

so far and to learn more. The maximum time we could take to complete the program was three years. I took all three to do it because I was learning to go slow. To allow myself to unfold. And as I did, I watched as the effects of yoga spilled over into my daily life. My practice happens everywhere now, in all that I do, so long as I maintain a duty of care for myself and for others (ahimsa, kindness, is the first tenet of yoga). Often this act of care happens in small ways.

Now the question rests: Am I over my friend's death? No. We don't get over things. We go through them. We learn. Hopefully we love deeper. Then, when we are ready and if it feels right for us, we share our stories. This is how I have learned to be here after loss.

'EMBODIED RESILIENCE THROUGH YOGA: 30 MINDFUL ESSAYS ABOUT FINDING EMPOWERMENT AFTER ADDICTION, TRAUMA, GRIEF, AND LOSS'



Kathryn Ashworth is an editor and writer at Yoga International. She views yoga as a healing resource that can re-awaken a sense of wonder and individual purpose and her specific interests lie in simple and adaptable practices that anyone can benefit from.



Embodied Resilience: 30 Mindful Essays About Finding Empowerment After Addiction, Trauma, Grief, and Loss (2020, Llewellyn Worldwide) is out now and available from www.llewellyn.com and Amazon.