

Dream Body

The room was empty when I showed up for Chadwick's 5:15 p.m. Heart Flow Yoga class at a downtown Tucson studio.

"Where is everyone?" I wondered. "I can't be the only student."

I had never had a private yoga session and was not in the mood for one. I laid down my mat and fretted: had I applied enough deodorant, would my yoga pants creep down or bunch up, how many times had I worn this top and did it truly pass the sniff test?

"You ready for this?" Chadwick asked when he came into the room. "Looks like it's just you and me." He was in his late thirties with dirty blonde hair and a build that was more athletic than yogini.

"I guess so," I said. "I've never had a private session."

"You'll like it," he promised.

We began with three ohms, juicy sounds that knit the body, voice and spirit into a vibrating whole. The ohms calmed me, and I let go into the practice as Chadwick corrected, pushed and prodded, gently, urging me to go deeper.

The hour went quickly and hit its crescendo with Wild Thing, a posture requiring an insouciant journey from three-legged dog to back bend that is one of my favorites. Hitting the one-sided backbend, heart open, makes me want to break into song.

Chadwick urged me to more fully arch and tilt. He stood beside me, supporting the posture, and I leaned and stretched deeper than ever before.

"I'd fall over if you weren't backing me," I said, sweat beading my forehead

"Let's see," he replied, slowly stepping away from my sloping body.

I stayed in the posture, my body arched into a slivered quarter moon, proud of the "limit" Chadwick helped me move beyond.

After class, I walked out into a beautiful Tucson evening to meet my husband Peter at Hotel Congress for dinner. My cheeks glowed and sweat glistened on my forehead. My hair was pulled back into a shabby little ponytail but I did not care. Inside of me, the postures and breathing shimmered through my blood, bone and marrow. I

felt, yes, smug.

The muscle and fascia of our bodies latch on to old stories, traumas and fears that hold us back in life and encourage us to repeat unhealthy behaviors. Like water to a sponge, we soak in and carry pain with us unless we consciously work to move, digest, breathe and release.

Yoga serves as a giant wringer, twisting and bending the sponge of our body, wringing out the old so we can create and claim healthier ways of living. Yoga also opens a direct line to our inner cinematographer, the creator of our unique dream images. Open up your body with daily yoga and grab your dream journal.

My dreams have never failed me, and Wild Thing, which moved me beyond my own perceived limits of what my body could do, did not let me down. My friend Rita showed up in my dream that night. In life, she is a full-bodied earthmother from Northern California who lives and breathes divine feminine spirit more than anyone I know. In my dream, Rita stared deeply into my eyes with irises shaped like mandalas, symbols of wholeness, created with shards of light tinted forest green, royal blue, cherry red and topaz. Each time she shifted her head slightly, the colors and shapes morphed like a kaleidoscope, creating images beautiful and complete. When I awakened, I felt a shift in my own body and soul, alive to my own divine, organic, ever-shifting feminine energy.

Three weeks later, a second posture, Heroine's Pose, broke me open. I am very flexible bending forward and can plant my palms on the floor with ease, but full backward bends, unlike the three-limbed bend of Wild Thing...challenging. Not just challenging, I hate and avoid them at all costs. My body as metaphor: I eagerly plunge forward, trying new things, while ignoring and avoiding crud from my past that lurks behind and can render me inflexible and rigid.

Heroine's Pose to the rescue.

The posture demands, while seated, a full backward bend onto the floor. I was glad my friend Kathy was taking the class with me.

"I can't do this," I said to her. "I don't even want to try."

"You can," she encouraged me. "We need some props."

Heroine's Pose is a seated yoga posture that stretches the thighs, ankles and spine. You begin with hips on the mat, legs bent and feet stretched backwards on either side of the hips. Many little kids sit like this with ease, their hips and legs forming a perfect "W" shape on the floor. I can kneel and do squats but forcing my butt to the

floor between both legs has never worked for me, even as a child.

I managed to pretzel into a seated “W,” propped by a cushion beneath my hips, but Heroine’s Pose demanded more. I began to ease my body backward toward the mat with the goal of reaching the floor. As a runner, I have very strong quads which make this posture even more difficult, which I kept telling Kathy, who did not care.

She placed a bolster beneath my back. I eased backward but knew it was way too far to reach.

“No way,” I said, tears threatening.

She piled a second bolster on top of the first.

“Try again,” she urged. “You can do it.” She kept her left hand on my right shoulder; her voice was low and comforting, but she would not let me off the hook.

I slowly eased back, inching toward the bolsters beneath me.

“Keep going,” she urged, “You’re nearly there.”

A few more inches and my back made contact while my legs, bent by my sides with feet angled behind me, stayed in their a perfect “W.” The eagle had landed! I felt like I had arrived on the moon’s surface with a large step for womankind, or at least for me.

“I did it!” I beamed at Kathy. “Thank you.”

I felt proud but also deeply vulnerable. Lying on the ground, legs angled behind me, I felt like a fileted fish, split open, exposed.

My dreams ran wild over the next few nights as my newly opened body produced vivid imagery of long-held trauma. As if Steven Spielberg had taken up residence while I slept, my dreams spun full-color cinematographic images that depicted the roots of my long-held pain.

The first night, the divine feminine spirit, which stared at me from Rita’s eyes, returned. In the dream, my mother and I dove off a dock, in perfect symmetry, and slid effortlessly beneath a deep blue lake. We surfaced simultaneously and swam to shore, side-by-side, barely rippling the water, our limbs loose, skin silvery in the moonlight.

The next night, my dreams took a different turn. I had been kidnapped by a car full of men. There were seven of us (same size as my family of origin) wedged into the car. They drove me to a house stocked with foods that were colorless, bland. Clear

chicken broth with white meat, white rice, oatmeal. No flavor, fragrance or color. I was trapped in an all-male space, physically safe, but confined to a life that was bland and tasteless.

On the third night, I dreamt of my father in his bathrobe. He kissed me good morning, and I could feel his erection against my thigh. I realized I was going to have to marry him because Mom was gone, and cringed at the thought. A friend from my past showed up and I was filled with deep relief that I could marry her instead of my father.

My dreams spun movies out of my deepest fears and unmet hungers: for my mother who died when I was 28; of the ways I felt starved and depleted by the male-dominated world, and of my father who terrorized me at puberty, not physically, but with words and glances, in the years before he became sober.

I wrote down each dream, let their wisdom penetrate my heart. I had known and talked with therapists about the pain of my mother, father and the male-dominated workplace but seeing my trauma in movie form made it impossible to deny. My dreams felt like the gift of a prism I could hold in my hands, shift slightly like Rita's irises, and allow in new light, energy and perspectives to transform my old stories.

Yoga not only inspires my body to tell its truth through dream images, the practice also empowers me with all I need to loosen and release old pain. All I have to do is pay attention to my dreams and show up every day on my mat to breathe, bend, twist, fold and release, a practice that is more therapeutic than 20 years of talk therapy.

My practice empowers me to stake a claim on my own body and reminds me I own the tools of movement, sweat, breath and imagination that provide me with all I need to rewrite the script of my life. In my self-created home movie, I am open, alive, divine and rooted. A wild thing bursting with life. The heroine of my own health and well-being.