



REFLECTIONS

The Wrong I Needed to Write

In the last two issues of *S&H*, I've written two articles. This is the one that was trying to get out. . .

WHEN I THINK BACK on the first years of my yoga practice, what comes to mind first is Pigeon Pose. Actually, when I think back on my experience with Pigeon Pose, it's remarkable that I stuck with yoga. Because in Pigeon Pose I felt as if I was being tortured. No, this is not hyperbolic speech. Each time I went into Pigeon Pose, I'd have images flash through my mind of terrible situations: women piled onto the train to Auschwitz, unable to move; women crossing illegally into the U.S., jammed together in the back of trucks with no air to breathe; women being held down, against their will.

Relax into the pose, the teacher would say, and I'd try to not to come out of the pose. I'd try to stay a little longer.

Most often, when people are in pain in a yoga pose, it's because they are doing something their body shouldn't do. But I was pretty sure that I wasn't overly straining my physical body. In fact, even though I hold tension in my hips, I'm also pretty flexible in my hips and always have been. My Pigeon Pose looked pretty good from the outside. But inside, it sent me into turmoil—and that made me curious.

So I kept coming back to yoga classes, and my body became more flexible, and I became more able to focus my mind on the movements themselves—at least until we got to Pigeon Pose. And still I found I couldn't stay with my body. The more I focused on what my body was feeling, the more I felt a kind of panic. So instead, I moved between the images in my head and some larger space, up above them, some distanced perspective from which I could come in and out of the scene.

In retrospect, it is no surprise that Pigeon Pose, which is a hip opener, triggered me. We often store our physical experiences directly in the body—and mine was childhood sexual abuse. Even when the conscious mind cannot remember, the body holds onto its own lived experiences in its cells. Yoga helped me practice coming in and out of this memory—even if I couldn't put it into words. It taught me, in a coded way, pieces of my own story that I had not, for a long time, been able to access.

We need to listen—and, at the same time, we need to have frameworks and stories to process what our bodies tell us. We need to be attentive and come out of the conscious mind.

And then we need to make connections between the unconscious mind and the conscious mind and knit our experiences back together.

My yoga classes set the stage for me to listen to my body, but classes didn't really prepare me or give me a real context or tools to understand the kind of triggers that might come up—or the ways really to listen to

the stories as they were unfolding through my practice. Over time, I worked with many modalities. I started to practice Kundalini yoga and then, once my body was more comfortable and had cleared out a lot of the stuck energy, turned to sitting meditation and the teachings of Thich Nhat Hanh. What I discovered is that I needed attention both to my body and to language; I needed both movement and stillness; I needed, ultimately, mind, body, and spirit all to come together.

At first I was writing poetry. And then I started also to write prose. No doubt, part of my turn to prose was a growing desire to knit things together, to tell a coherent story. Like Hansel and Gretel, I was able to follow the moonlit pebbles

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» *Iberian Snake*
Carol Wellart

that lead back to my own early experiences and that ultimately lead me back to myself.

And when I did this, I received a great gift: I was able truly to come home.

This does not mean that home is always a warm and easy place. It's not as if, at the end of the practice, we can turn on the lights and all the witches will be revealed as simply a bad dream, a figment of our childhood imaginations. People *were* brought in cattle cars to Auschwitz, and illegal immigrants *continue* to face unbearable situations in their search for a better and freer way of life. And women and children

and men continue to be sexually assaulted and abused.

The fruit of our yoga practice and our spiritual practice is not that we can simply relax in our comfortable, safe yoga studios and drop the outside world and simply enjoy the present moment. The fruit of our practice is that we can come to better see the world as it is; that we can find peace and equanimity even amid injustice and pain; that we can discover our stories and accept them; that we can experience joy and happiness and relaxation and not turn away from our own suffering or the suffering of others.

—NADIA COLBURN