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## Race and Yoga

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## God, Nature, and Yoga as Somewhere in Between

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The sand from the ocean breeze kept scratching my face as I sat near a secluded Belizean beach. The smell of the salt lifting off of the sea was sweet and soft. I loved this secret beach in a little town off the Caribbean Sea because the culture was rich and the environment unspoiled by tourist foot traffic. The tourists that did sprinkle by came for the blue water, scuba diving and coconut rum. But I came to Belize specifically for the Garifuna culture that strongly connected to Yoruba belief systems, Indigenous Aarawak memories, and other mysterious spiritual practices. The town of Dangriga was funky but it had soul. Everything was colorful; my neighbors expressed themselves with passionate words and movements while dancing teenagers and barefoot kids played on the pier. But amongst all this vibrancy, I was miserably solemn.

How could I be unhappy in paradise? I hadn't yet learned about yogic yamas and niyamas such as *santoshā* (contentment). I was searching for a deeper experience outside of the normal "get a job" narrative. My deeper experience came from discovering yoga after tragedy. Unlike most people, yoga did not show up in a cute little feel good studio class on a pleasant morning. My journey into yoga connected me to the power of nature, the hope for a God and my introduction into a new way of life that would eternally guide my perspective on managing the most extreme experience of my life.



Figure 1 - Sari Leigh in Tree Pose (Photo Credit: Wanakhavi Wakhisi)

Yoga showed up when I thought I was living my purpose. At 25 years old, I traveled to Belize to serve as a United States Peace Corps Volunteer, but I found myself in the middle of a tragic storyline. One random day, the Belizean family hosting our stay took us on a trip to a remote mountain with a waterfall cave. It started out as an exciting day for all of us. We leisurely packed ourselves in and journeyed up a path that we had no idea would literally flip our lives around. Unaware of the future, another volunteer and I joked about how lucky we were to get off the beaten path and see something we've never seen before. Prophetic, eerie and chilling. Yet I am grateful for this unique opportunity to see God's hands in nature at work.

While riding in a pick up truck down the mountainous area of the country, our truck flipped over and left two people dead. I was in the back of the pick up truck between the two people who, just moments before, were laughing, gazing at waterfalls and sharing stories about our favorite American athletes. Then one moment later, I was rolling down a hill looking back at a truck overturned onto a little boy's head. It was gut wrenching. This moment was utterly gut wrenching. One moment ago life was amazing and now life was over for a little boy traveling with us. When I realized what happened, I screamed up to the sky. I touched my body, I looked around, and I went blank.

In this moment, I witnessed raw nature playing out before my eyes. The road decided to lift our truck up off the ground and twirl it around in the air. We later learned that the driver was driving too fast around a curve. God or nature decided to save some lives and not others. I had yet to learn what role yoga would play in my life. But immediately I realized that my entire self would never be the same. I was trapped in a state of surreal denial. This moment did not discriminate. It was not tied to my gender, my age, race, weight, sexual orientation or any other visible attribute to categorize my place in the world. I was a living being with the potential and inevitability of a mortal ending. First wrangled by nature, later assumingly protected by God and ultimately to be healed with yoga.

Making our way back to the hospital, I could hear the wails coming from the other car following behind us. It was the little boy's mother. I still remember the feeling of the hard stillness of everyone in the car with me. I could feel the tears, shock, frozen numbness of the driver who was going a little too fast down the unpaved road. My skin felt like octopus skin: electric, sensory filled yet rubbery and impenetrable. My throat felt locked. My heart felt like an anchor at the bottom of the sea. I could feel my whole body, but I couldn't think. I was in a still state of denial. I survived a car accident.

The car accident opened up a new window for me into the world of trauma, memory, pain and healing. Trauma wasn't a word I used until this car accident. Yes I had experienced painful life events and difficult situations, but I'd never associated them with an actual clinical definition like the word trauma. Family members would say, "we all go through something." Church leaders would say, "God won't give you more than you can handle." Even social norms would convey, "it could be worse." But this time around, this trauma was too heavy to church away. The images and the deep sadness were too vivid to move away from. I really had no idea how to manage such an unimaginable event. I knew that I had to do something or else my everyday life experiences would begin to unravel as a result of the burdensome weight in my head and on my heart.

I learned the value of the present. Before this experience, I'd ignore the sunrise and turn over to catch an extra hour of sleep. Now, I opened my heart up to telling my community about my pain, crying in my neighbor's arms over the loss in my life. I shed people and embraced being vulnerable by living in the now. I started celebrating the small and seemingly meaningless

things. I took chances on big risky things. I could no longer live my life with the assumption that nothing would ever change, or that I had any control over the change. All that I could do was breathe and be present. Being present meant fighting back night sweats, flashbacks and triggers. Being present meant having to talk to my loved ones back home who were already worried sick about me being far from home. Being present meant facing the little boy's family with tears streaming down my face at the circumstances. I just wasn't ready to live in my reality. I wanted to escape. I came to Belize to escape my life in Baltimore, Maryland but this became a prison. Everywhere I turned there was a reminder of trauma. I'd reached a point where no one could offer words, actions or consolation. Until, someone who happened to be a German psychologist, suggested I seek professional therapy. I didn't rebuke, fight or resist. I'd exhausted all of my healing options and I went to therapy.

### **Facing the world**

Facing the world after a tragedy is a raw and vulnerable experience. If everyone knows that you went through something horrible, there is a stain of pity and sorrow that hovers over you like shadow. If no one knows your tragedy and pain, you walk around feeling like an imposter. The problem is that so much of our emotional well-being after tragedy is internal. The unseen, dark and hidden parts of our happy and sad moments are not posted on a billboard or on reality TV. They happen during an uncontrollable cry in your car while waiting at a stoplight or when you hear a song that reminds you of a painful moment. Tragedy often lives in the memory of the senses that are triggered at unpredictable and often uncontrollable times, like the smell of cologne that reminds you of a creepy family friend. So facing the world requires both internal and external loci of control. Control is what we lose when we experience tragic and sudden pain, grief or loss. My sense of equilibrium is thrown off by this mysterious string of events resulting in loss and pain. The hardest part was that people around me had no idea how to react, support or respond to me.

Everyone tried to help me by offering ways to gain control. My uncle suggested that I get a job and move home. Friends recommended that I share my testimony in churches about the miracle of God. Others recommended that I just accept it and move on. All of these attempts to regain control were masks and fake faces that I would show to the world. They weren't real actions that addressed the root of my pain. The root of my pain rested in the discovery that my life had some purpose. My life is a symbol of survival but there was no clear pathway or system to help me manage this new discovery. By this time I'd completed my intensive therapy feeling more whole and healed, but my behavior was more cautious, reflective and pensive. I longed for guidance, a pathway, some insight into what to do next. I did a lot of praying to God, thanking God, questioning God and asking of God. Then a little yoga book appeared on a dusty Peace Corps used bookshelf.



Figure 2 - Sari Leigh in Dancer's Pose (Photo Credit: Wanakhavi Wakhisi)

### **The Mat took meaning**

Yoga showed up in my life subtly and coincidentally in the form of deep breathing. The book was an ominous guide. I'd been searching for something that could physically address my emotions, not just the cerebral and visceral impact of trauma. The first few pages offered simple guidance to the basic sun salutation, breathing techniques, and Ayurvedic recipes. The yoga book was timely and gentle. I started with the three-part breath, which is a very simple breathing pattern designed to settle the nervous system. Then I practiced the sun salutations by mirroring the images in the book. The movements felt beautiful, easy and mechanical. Yoga became a simple practice that I could seamlessly integrate into my life in a remote Belizean village. I kept up with my simple three part breath and sun salutations for almost six months. As the word started to get around the Peace Corps community that I'd been using yoga to manage my trauma, someone asked me to introduce yoga to a group of doctors and nurses working with HIV positive patients. Belize has one of the highest rates of HIV infection in Central America. The small population of 350,000 people makes managing a disease like HIV a very complex experience. Everyone in Belize knows each other and the trauma of a diagnosis can devastate a small community. The doctors and nurses were feeling the burden of repeatedly giving HIV positive notices to fellow parents, teachers, friends and young women. The medical community began to internalize the trauma after managing the disease in their villages. There were more deaths than they anticipated and less therapy than necessary. I happened to be a perfect risk because I'd tested the yoga medicine on myself.



Figure 3 - Sari Leigh in Tree Pose (Photo Credit: Wanakhavi Wakhisi)

My first yoga class was one of the most beautiful classes I'd have ever taught. Seven beautiful nurses and three doctors were perched around a coconut tree on a beach called South Water Caye. Pelicans were skipping through the blue waves and there wasn't a sound other than rustling leaves for miles. I decided to focus on guided imagery and meditation. I didn't have fancy academic research to back up my claim that yoga healed trauma. I didn't bring a wealth of yoga literature, meditation beads or goddess statues. All I had was me with an Afro in a pair of black yoga pants and a white candle. I deeply believed that yoga was a good foundation to help these doctors and nurses. I'd been right where they've been. Similar to these HIV workers, I faced something difficult and painful directly in the eye. I could now guide them with breathing, movement and words to work through the pain.



Figure 4 - Sari Leigh Offering an Assist to Students in Her Class (Photo Credit: Wanakhavi Wakhisi)

The guided imagery, the three part breath and the *asana* movements became the template for how I taught classes for the rest of my yoga journey. This moment with the doctors and nurses on the beach officially started my journey as a yoga teacher. I invited each of them to

gaze at the sunset on the horizon: inhale empowering breaths and exhale cleansing breaths. I prompted them to feel the weight of their own bodies anchored to the ground, yet allow the lightness of the breath to carry them into the clouds. I learned what kind of yoga teacher I was to become. My secret sauce was based in the authentic connection I had with their experiences. My guru was my pain and sadness. My first yoga teachers were the tears and the nightmares. I learned about the human body, the nervous system and the mind after taming the wild horse of trauma with therapy and yoga. I would later learn to refine my teaching skills after taking certifications and practicing with experienced yoga professionals. I learned through Kemetic Yoga the importance of a heart-centered practice in guiding our intentions. I learned about the importance of balancing the flow of energy throughout the human body through a Prana Yoga training. When I felt anger, emotional rage, hurt or pain, I focused on a deep fire breathing *asana* practice to cleanse heavy energy. If I felt exhausted, overwhelmed or stressed, I incorporated more soothing restorative meditations and restorative poses. The cookie cutter yoga class never fit my style. My yoga pedagogy was rooted in my emotional struggle and subsequent success in overcoming these emotions. I wanted my yoga classes to serve as a space to work through the hardships that are unique to the many Black women's experience. Pain from loss, being disrespected in a relationship, strife with a family member, or disappointment in a job. We have so many similar experiences, but have so few outlets for healing. My goal is to transcend class, education and income. I instruct my yoga classes to create a space for clarity no matter the age, gender or class. I ventured to offer yoga to women in Barry Farms, DC, who brought their kids to a concrete recreation floor in muggy summer to learn about relaxation. I wanted to be with the 300-pound diabetic who couldn't move his arms without breaking into a sweat. My heart felt at home with the homeless youth in Congress Heights who cracked jokes to hide behind the pain that they didn't know where the next night would lead them. My feeble attempts at becoming a yoga superstar were met with empty "Namaste's" in upscale DC yoga studios. My healing medicine was just another Starbucks latte for the 20-something hipsters. It wasn't that I didn't feel needed, but it felt like my medicine was being wasted on people whose lives didn't reflect the deep journeys that were hungry for the kind of yoga class I wanted to offer.



Figure 5 - Sari Leigh Leading a Class in Tree Pose (Photo Credit: Wanakhavi Wakhisi)

The soul of my yoga journey is planted in my ability to overcome the difficult with little to no access to structured emotional therapy. This experience with trauma made me hate nature and question God for the car accident. But somewhere in between, yoga showed up to be more than a gimmick or a spiritual detour. Yoga was now my daily spiritual practice. What started with a few simple deep breathing exercises evolved into a mind-body system that I have used to sustain my life. Looking back, I see the car accident as a blessing to me and so many other people who I have shared yoga with. Everyone who takes my class can sense that there is a profound experience behind the instruction. I have let go of the trauma and pain but I don't let go of the self-discovery that came from these experiences. For the participants, I invite the spirit of self-healing into the room. I make space for personal pain to rise up and out of your memory. I acknowledge the need to be still when everything in you expects you to keep going. Yoga made sense of God, nature and where we exist, somewhere in between.

**Sari Leigh** created Anacostia Yogi to offer a platform for Black women's health and healing through yoga. Sari is a 200 hour Registered Yoga Instructor and has a Master of Arts in Women's Studies and is completing a PhD in Counseling at The George Washington University. Sari uses her blog, [www.AnacostiaYogi.com](http://www.AnacostiaYogi.com) to explore mind body healing and social justice for Black women.