

The
Many
Faces
of

YOGA

Story and photos by Valerie DePan
Design by Nikolina Hatton

Whether searching for pain relief or spiritual fulfillment, some find the answer through yoga

Margaret Nelson, 43, a yoga model for Providence Health Care's fitness advertisements, wakes up every day with neck, shoulder and head pain. "There are some days when the headaches are worse, which make getting through the day almost unbearable," she says.

But Nelson has found a measure of relief through yoga. She says yoga helps her manage her pain, and in the process she has discovered unexpected benefits, among them joy and youthfulness.

Nelson, also a banker/lender and yoga instructor, may look like a picture of health but she also suffers from occasional depression and sleepless nights. She attributes her daily upper body pain to a school bus accident she was in at age nine. The school bus in Fort Wayne, Ind., rolled into a cornfield when the brakes failed. Nelson landed on her head with the bus seat and school books on top of her. Afterward, she and other students got up and walked to school while students with more obvious injuries were taken to the hospital, she said.

"When I got home from school and I told my mother what happened, she was furious," Nelson said. "She took me straight to the hospital and had a doctor take x-rays." The x-rays showed scoliosis and cracks in her cervical spine on vertebrae C6 and C7, Nelson said. "My mother decided to have me treated by a chiropractor, a practice back in those days that was regarded as quackery. However, the weekly treatments that lasted for about a

year cured the scoliosis." Nelson regards her mother as a woman who was ahead of her time.

Nelson was recently diagnosed with advanced stages of osteoarthritis in her cervical spine. The daily pain that she lives with didn't occur until she and her husband Eric moved to Oregon in their late twenties, she said. One day in her early thirties she picked up a book titled "Perfect Health: the Complete Mind/Body Guide," written by Dr. Deepak Chopra. "This book changed my life," she said. At that point nothing was stopping the pain. "I tried traditional medicine, acupuncture, chiropractors and massage and while most methods provided temporary relief, acupuncture didn't work at all," Nelson said. Chopra's book suggested yoga. Nelson knew about yoga, saying that her mother used to practice it at home.

Inspired by Chopra's book, "I signed up for a class in downtown Portland at Holiday's Health and Fitness studio, and after one class, I felt the benefits right way," Nelson said. "I noticed that my arms were hanging comfortably from my side. That was after a chest-opening posture and all I knew is that I wanted more.

"After practicing 10 years of yoga, I still live with pain but I don't identify with pain like I used to," she said. No longer a victim or angry, "with yoga I can live with it." It makes life more bearable by taking the edge off, she said. "Yoga is joyful; it doesn't feel like exercise which is why it works for me." Nelson calls inversion poses (headstands and handstands) her Prozac, explaining that it makes her feel instantly better, more energetic and light-hearted.

Nelson, standing roughly five-feet six-inches tall, sleek, slender and fit with shoulder length blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail, looks a lot like Meryl Streep. She says, with a twinkle in her clear, sparkling blue-gray eyes, “Another reason I do yoga is a result of my vanity. It makes me look and feel more youthful. Yoga is like that — it makes you feel young.”

Rob Marshall, MA, LMT and founder of Better Ways of Being, is a personal wellness counselor who says yoga seems to work the mind and body on a holistic level. “Traditional medical establishments are waking up and realizing the benefits of integrative medicine,” he said.

Joseph T. Leimert, MD, 59, a staff physician in the Department of Hematology-Oncology at Kaiser Permanente in Portland, agrees that “our health finds maintenance and augmentation from many sources. Yoga is one of those sources which requires our commitment and rewards us with many possible gains including improved strength, reduction in chronic pain, improved sense of peace and self confidence.”

Marshall said yoga and meditation are “by far one the most

beneficial practices anyone can undertake. It promotes strength, endurance, flexibility and balance.” The way yoga works is that “it rewires your neural connections through conscious, physical and mental effort,” he said. It does this by “engaging the body in various physical postures and by doing so it also fosters spiritual well being.”

Nelson, who is also a yoga instructor for Providence Health Care, says anybody can do yoga and that no matter where they are in their practice, they are right where they are supposed to be. She explains students shouldn’t be competing with other students in their poses.

Post pain, Leimert explains, “may produce chronic degenerative changes in the spine and in joints which may be painful.”

While yoga means many things to different people, people of all ages are using yoga postures and breathing to treat symptoms of a number of diagnosis including fibromyalgia, chronic fatigue syndrome, multiple sclerosis, cancer, pain management, grief and bereavement and stress release. Nelson is one example of a woman who has tried everything to manage her pain. Others have found yoga and breathing as a way to cope with different kinds of pain.

Leimert says, “Yoga practiced regularly can have profound effects on wellbeing including improvement in how pain is perceived. Yoga helps to move us from a place of self doubt and one in which we define ourselves in terms of our weaknesses to one of confidence and self definition from the vantage of our strength.” Yoga and other forms of whole body exercise done regularly generally improve the appearance of the person by virtue of their improved posture, muscle and skin tone, he suggests. “Health tends to radiate its wellbeing,” he said.

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Margaret Nelson,
yoga instructor



Adele Steinwinder, 67, started practicing yoga in her sixties. After realizing its benefits, she now practices 10 minutes before work each day, she said.

Steinwinder was devastated when her doctor diagnosed her with breast cancer almost two years ago. “It tore me apart emotionally,” she said softly.

“My doctor told me that there were many choices,” she said. One of those choices was how to regain control of her emotions while deciding how to proceed with treatments. Other choices were prioritizing which activities to stay involved with. Faced with the possibility of dying gave her whole new meaning to life and to those around her, she said.

Prior to cancer, Steinwinder said she stumbled upon yoga in a demonstration at Wild Oats in Lake Oswego five years ago. Impressed, she said to herself, “I should do this.” She signed up for classes twice a week and stayed with it because it was making her feel better, she said.

Steinwinder attributes her yoga practice to giving her the strength and fortitude to deal with her emotional crisis. She said she stayed involved with yoga at her doctor’s encouragement. Faced with so many choices, she said she was glad she did. “Through yoga I found inner peace and spirituality that was extremely beneficial,” she said. The breathing techniques particularly helped her reduce the stress and promoted relaxation, she said. The radiation treatments dropped her energy levels but she said yoga and breathing countered those effects.

Leimert encourages Steinwinder and all who have discovered yoga to continue the practice for the rest of their lives. For Steinwinder, and many others, yoga is a constant place in a changeable world. It is a place accessed by choice and therefore cannot be absent when most needed.

About a year ago, Steinwinder said she was in a car accident and the vehicle was totaled. Steinwinder said she was banged up badly but nothing serious. The doctor at the emergency room who x-rayed her asked what was she doing that seemed to protect her from an accident that under most circumstances should have produced far more serious injuries. Steinwinder attributed her lack of injuries to yoga.

Steinwinder’s oncologist, Leimert, agrees. “Yes, I believe that a yoga practice gave Adele physical benefits which improved her odds of coming from the accident as well as she did.”

Today, Steinwinder, a breast cancer survivor, says life is more precious and as a result she is doing more things for others because she doesn’t know how long she’s going to live. Steinwinder lives in Lake Oswego and works in Vancouver, Wash., for BPA as an engineering technician. She’s been married for 43 years and has a daughter, 42, and a son, 39.

Marshall says, “Psychological trauma is stored in the body and can very easily be triggered by environmental stimuli or changes in physiology. Since these body ‘memories’ are embedded in unconscious patterns be-



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Rob Marshall (above),
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Adele Steinwinder at one of Margaret Nelson’s classes.



“Through yoga I found inner peace and spirituality that was extremely beneficial.”

Adele Steinwinder (above left),
breast cancer survivor
working with Nelson

tween mind and body, they can be very challenging to work with.” However, it can be controlled, he says, by routinely disciplining our bodies into postures and movement that focus on alignment and extension of the skeletal system.

This coupled with mindfulness and awareness of how all things are connected and influence one another is very effective, he said. “I agree that the mindfulness and awareness fostered by yoga have benefits off the mat as well as on it.”

Some people link yoga to paganism or consider it a religion of its own. Some yoga students find the practice brings them on the path to greater spirituality.

Sue Redding, 53, began losing her vision during her first year in college. At age 20, she was declared certifiably and legally blind due to an incurable disease related to retinitis pigmentosa which is the deterioration of the pigment layer behind the retina.

Years later, Redding and her former partner, John, bought a house together in Portland off Hawthorne Boulevard. Three years later, John was diagnosed with colon cancer. By the fourth year, John’s cancer had metastasized and Redding said she needed to find ways to reduce her increasing stress. During John’s final months, Redding turned to massage and began to consider other outlets for relief as she sat by John’s side during his suffering.

John died in July 1993 but he ultimately ended his suffering by his own choice, committing suicide with a handgun, Redding said. “He was so sick he couldn’t keep the meds down.” Redding, who witnessed his pain and suffering, supported him in his ultimate decision to end his own life, adding that “we are kinder to our pets.”

Redding was bereaved, traumatized, depressed and disoriented and began to have thoughts of suicide as she went through what she described as a spiritual crisis after John’s death. Redding had never considered herself spiritual until she began having strong visions. John came back from the spiritual world to visit her. “It was very comforting. It felt like him but without his body. I have no doubt that there is an afterlife.” His message to her was: “Time means nothing here — you can be in all the good places and all the good moments at all the same time.”

Redding had always considered John grounded and into nature. It was through him and in her blindness that she felt his connectedness to earth, nature and to God, she said. She said she felt the connection through holding his hand. Redding attributes her spiritual experience — seeing John’s spirit — to her shattered vulnerability. She was open to receive and in a place to see things whereas she wasn’t willing to see before and attributes that to a heightened awareness and keen sensitivity. Redding likened her brokenness to that of a puzzle. However, the final picture — vague with uncertainty, combined with vulnerabil-

ity — all contributed to her increased awareness.

Leimert said, “We may either open ourselves to the universe for help in easing that pain or we may, alternatively, close down in a way that won’t let more hurt in.” In Leimert’s experience, “Opening to the universe is the only way we will find the peace and love that heals our grief. When we are ready for that opening, we don’t know exactly what it is we will find or feel. To stay open for whatever arrives, to have a sense of hope and expectation that at least some of what arrives will be good fosters our sensitivity and awareness,” he said.

Redding joined a bereavement class and began attending the Unitarian Church where she met a group of women and signed up for a women’s ancient spirituality class. It was in the spirituality class that she met a woman who introduced her to yoga. She distinctly recalls the first time she practiced yoga. “It was like coming home,” she said. Redding reclaimed her body through yoga in a way that she has never before and said, “Our cul-

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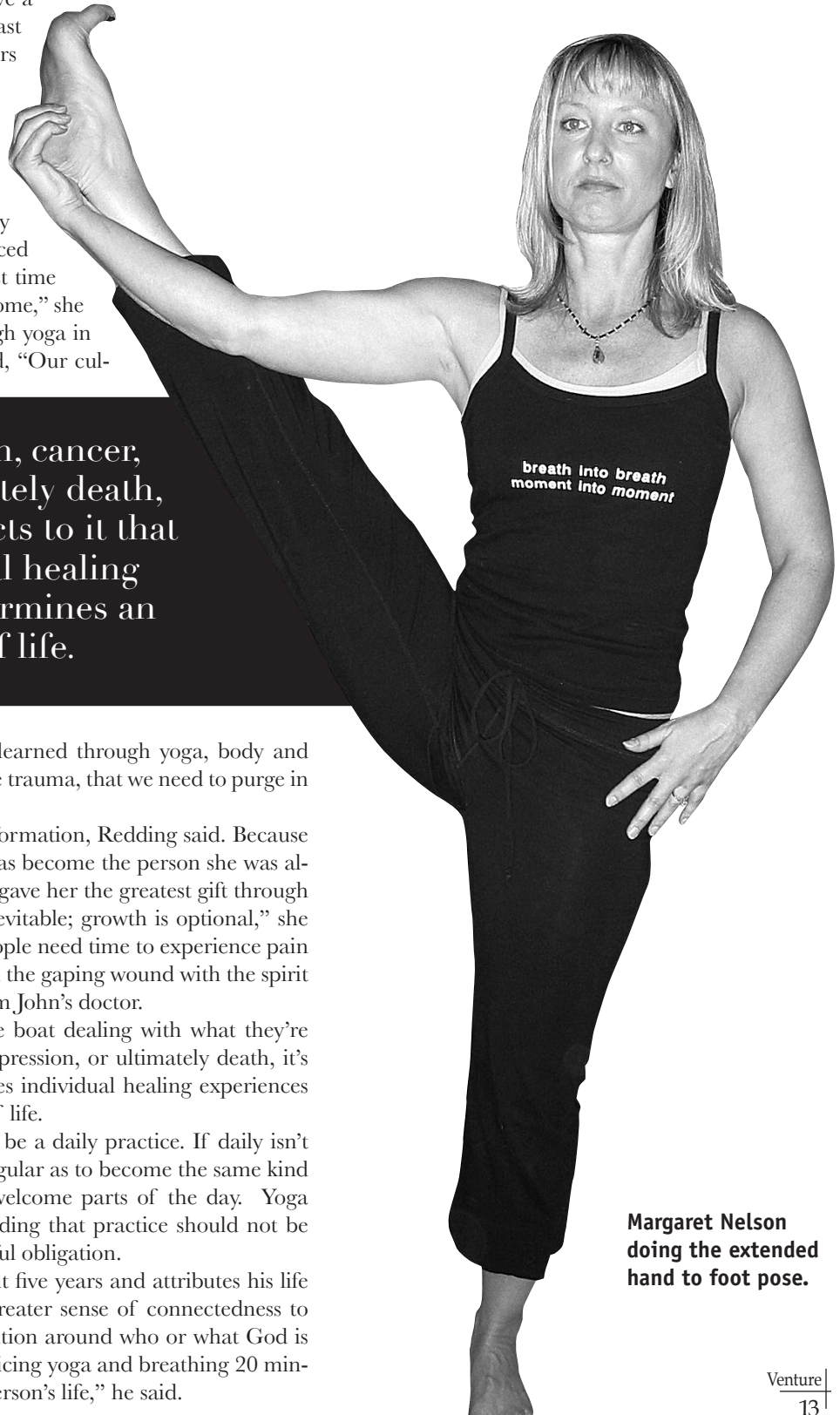
ture teaches us to ignore our bodies. I learned through yoga, body and energy work there are things we store, like trauma, that we need to purge in order to become fully who we are.”

Yoga has been essential for her transformation, Redding said. Because of the pain that she went through, she has become the person she was always meant to be, she said. John’s death gave her the greatest gift through adversity, she said. “In life, change is inevitable; growth is optional,” she quotes. Redding also recognizes that people need time to experience pain but in order to move on, “You need to fill the gaping wound with the spirit of the dead,” something she learned from John’s doctor.

Marshall said everyone’s in the same boat dealing with what they’re given. Whether it’s whiplash, cancer, depression, or ultimately death, it’s how a person reacts to it that determines individual healing experiences and determines an individual’s quality of life.

Leimert recommends yoga ideally to be a daily practice. If daily isn’t possible, then it needs at least to be so regular as to become the same kind of comfort and peace found in other welcome parts of the day. Yoga should never be a struggle, he said, adding that practice should not be approached with dread or sense of painful obligation.

Leimert has been practicing for about five years and attributes his life experiences to helping him develop a greater sense of connectedness to God and diminished need to have definition around who or what God is beyond compassion and love. “Just practicing yoga and breathing 20 minutes a day can change the quality of a person’s life,” he said.



**Margaret Nelson
doing the extended
hand to foot pose.**