

## Stories from the brainreels podcast

June 9, 2015

### Introduction

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CHERYL: Welcome to Stories from the brainreels. I'm your host, Cheryl Green, from StoryMinders up in sunny Portland, Oregon. This is a monthly podcast about brain injury and disability with a focus on art, culture, and disability pride. Contact me at [info@storyminders.com](mailto:info@storyminders.com) with questions or topics and guests you want to hear on an upcoming show.

[music]

CHERYL: Summer is here. That means more sports and outdoorsy-ness for a lot of people. I don't often talk about safety on this show. But it's always on my mind. Please, please, please, don't dive head first into the water, especially in rivers and lakes. Rainfall has been really low in the Pacific Northwest. Water's not as deep as it looks. Back when I trained to be a lifeguard in the Northern California hills, we learned "Feet first first time." Don't be a hot dog about jumping in the water. Just be safe.

Also, for you skaters, long boarders, cyclists, whoever who aren't gonna wear a helmet no matter how much we wag our fingers at you, please check out the fantastic skull cap just out by [Impact Reduction Apparel](#). It's a super hi-tech flexible protector that fits snugly into a ball cap. Their testing shows that it reduces skull fracture. It won't prevent concussions. But reducing the chance of skull fracture is going to go a hell of a long way in improving the odds that someone who lands on their head is going to recover well. Sneak it into your cap. No one will laugh at you for wearing a dorky helmet. Spread the word about how you can protect your brain and look cool at the same time. I know so many peers with brain injury who now say that the brain injury was a positive turning point in their lives and opened them up to new experiences and perspectives. But seriously, not a one of them has suggested that more people get a brain injury just to see if you also have that kind of post-traumatic happiness. Helmets. IRA's skull cap. Feet first in the water. Call me anytime, and I will remind you of these things if you want.

If you're interested in low injury-risk activity like yoga, you're gonna love today's conversation with Sarahjoy Marsh of DAYA Foundation and Living Yoga. Even if you're not a yoga person, you're going to take away a lot of fantastic perspectives of wellness, self-leadership, and social justice today.

In other news, most of the podcast episodes are transcribed. And all the transcripts already available are accessible for screen readers. Please visit [WhoAmItoStopIt.com](http://WhoAmItoStopIt.com) for the show transcripts and links mentioned in all the podcast episodes. Now to the conversation with Sarahjoy.

### Interview with Sarahjoy Marsh

CHERYL: Sarahjoy, thank you for coming to be on the podcast today.

SARAHJOY: You're welcome. I'm glad to be here.

CHERYL: I really appreciate it. Sarahjoy, you're a certified yoga teacher, a yoga therapist, and an author. You teach classes, private lessons, and train other yoga teachers, yoga outreach volunteers, and mental health providers. You started studying yoga 25 years ago, which was, you know of course, before I was born.

SARAHJOY: [giggles]

CHERYL: And you've been teaching professionally for 22 years. You combined your extensive yoga experience with your Masters in Counseling as well as your own life experience to create amrita yoga, which is a form of vinyasa yoga that integrates Ayurveda, physical therapy, neuroscience, yoga philosophy and psychology, pranayama, and mindfulness. I'm wondering if you would share some of your personal experiences that led you to yoga and that motivated you to do yoga in this way that's so much more than stretching or just meditating or even just physical fitness.

### **Milestones and hurdles in finding yoga**

SARAHJOY: Yeah, so I would be delighted to tell you some of the milestones and also the hurdles that I faced in my own life as a yoga student and as a yoga teacher. And I'll go recent history, and then I'll go back in history. So relatively recent history is having had a motor vehicle accident that was really relatively benign. I had my feet on the dashboard in the passenger seat. And the driver didn't see that the car ahead of us had stopped, and she rear-ended them. She wasn't a bad driver. She wasn't even an unskillful driver. She didn't realize that they had stopped. She had her head turned left. We hit the car in front of us. And my hip had a compression injury. And that injury turned out to be much more significant than the first blush of looking at it. I had damage to the soft tissue inside the hip joint. I had a labral tear, which is like the rubber gasket on the jar that seals it. But it's the surfacing of your inner hip joint. And I started having bone spurs and some nerve damage as a result of that. That led to the decision to take a kind of contemporary surgery approach: I had a labral tear repair. And then that failed, and I had to have a total hip replacement. That's when I was 42 years old. So at that time, people 42 years and younger were not generally having hip replacements. It was a significant decision. But otherwise, I wasn't able to walk, ride my bike, sit at my desk comfortably. I couldn't walk from one end of the hallway here at the yoga studio to the other end of the hallway without significant limping. And it was only getting worse.

So I decided on the hip replacement, and I went through what I call "yoga pre-hab." It means getting ready for my surgery. I met with my surgeon. We made some decisions together, specifically the kind of apparatus that I have in my hip joint. And now being someone on the other side of that, I recommend to all people considering any kind of significant surgery like that, that you actually speak to your surgeon and find out what the options are. What are the options for the apparatus, for example? Then, I went through significant yoga rehab after my surgery. And I learned to walk again, essentially twice. Because the first surgery failed so badly that my walking was really disrupted. By the time I had my hip replaced, I wasn't walking like a normal person. And I had to relearn that. And it taught me a lot about my brain capacity and my body capacity, both of them, for healing. I relied a lot on what I call cross-crawl patterns. And I'm using that term based on what other fields of study call cross-crawl pattern. But I needed the cross-crawl pattern to help me re-establish brain balance because my right leg had been

damaged for so long, and the way I was walking was affecting not just my outlook but my in-look and my attitude towards myself. And it was unusual for me not to experience a sense of equanimity, ease, or resilience in my life because I had prior to that pretty high equanimity and resilience. But I wasn't sleeping through the night. And I was in chronic pain. And I saw that changing my body and my mood. And I knew it was changing my brain.

So based on those things, the way that I rehabbed after my hip replacement became a program here called Yoga and Strength Conditioning and a second program called Adaptive Yoga. Because I was then really committed to seeing how can yoga be accessible to everyone of any capacity at any stage of healing and/or illness. How can we help recondition the body and the brain and the heart and our outlook and our in-look too? So those things really informed me. Prior to my car accident, I was already a student of yoga and of Ayurveda. Ayurveda is like the science of life and the science of living well. And it looks at your personal constitution. That means your temperament as a person with a physiological, biological, neurological makeup. There are three constitutions in Ayurveda. They're called Vata, Pitta, and Kapha. And I had been studying that for some time and really watching the benefits of it in my own life, really deep benefits like better digestion and better sleep. And overall, that sense of equanimity and resilience that I mentioned a few minutes ago was really sustained by my understanding of how to live according to Ayurveda.

So when I looked at my student population, and more people started coming who had serious life illnesses or who had trauma in their history or who had tendencies for anxiety or depression or students who might come with a consideration for how to move from complacency in their life to inspiration and courage in their life, I started applying Ayurveda to that. Looking at the outcomes year to year in our student community here, there's no way I could teach yoga going forward without including Ayurveda. So the amrita yoga style is really a blend of those things that I've had to learn through my own direct experience, and that is Ayurveda, neuroscience, brain science, body rehab, reciprocal muscle inhibition, mindfulness as a tool, which I had to use in significant doses during my surgery to just get through things like recovering from anesthesia, pain medication, lying in bed for six weeks in August of 2008.

You know, I'm not a stationary person by nature. You know that. I ride my bike to commute. And I love to garden. I have a really active life. And I was in bed for six weeks. So I needed my mindfulness practice to keep me from going stir crazy. And in 2010, again, I was in bed for a few weeks after my hip replacement. I was alternating between resting and walking. But I definitely needed mindfulness to learn to walk again, to even know where my body was in physical space. So that's all combined into what we now call amrita yoga.

But if we look back 26 years ago, when I first got introduced to yoga, it was pretty happenstance. I was going to art school in Boston, Massachusetts. I was relatively depressed and anxious. I did not have high equanimity or resilience. I came out of early life experiences that I call vacuous, like I don't know where my parents were. I didn't have internalized images of parents helping me. They were definitely around. But I didn't have a sense of connection. Both of my parents have their own trauma histories. And it makes sense, what their parenting styles were. And in hindsight, I can see and have compassion for it. But at 19 years old, as a person going to art school and feeling a high level of despair, anxiety, sort of like lost in the world, where's my place, what am I doing, I decided to leave art school and go to art therapy

school. And that coincided with my first endeavor up a steep mountain with a backpack to go hiking. I went on a five-day, solo backpacking trip without any prior experience, which tells you about the amount of determination. And at the top of the first peak, on this mountain hike, I had to set down the backpack that I was carrying. And it really was like setting down the burden of anxiety in my life. Also, I was very driven at that time. And anxiety manifested in an urge to control food or the intake of food or exercise and the amount of exercise. I was definitely using disordered eating patterns to navigate anxiety. That's actually what my book is about. I'll talk about that towards the end of our podcast.

So when I set the backpack down, and I recognized that I was 1) exhausted, and 2) relieved to put the backpack down, and then 3) I lifted my gaze, and I saw around me this incredible expanse in New Hampshire, at the top of this mountain. It was awe in every direction. I call that the 360 degrees of awe, now, looking back at my life at that moment. And when I saw that awe, I wanted that way more than I wanted anxiety to rule my life. That's when I initiated stretching my body on the top of this mountain, doing what I now know is called yoga. At the time, I had no idea. But the stretching in the company of awe was so soothing and so different than my experience of myself had been for years that it overpowered the urge to stay in anxiety and gave me the courage to move on.

So from that first stretching incident or episode, I didn't stop. I stayed with it. Day to day, I stretched my body, and then I would pretend to meditate. I say pretend because I didn't really know what meditation was.

CHERYL: Yeah.

SARAHJOY: And I didn't need to know, because what I was doing, even pretending, was actually helpful. So that was 26 years ago when I found yoga. And I was pretty introverted about it. My family didn't know. My co-students at the art therapy program didn't know. I didn't have a particularly big need to say or exclaim anything. So you know, 26 years ago, now looking at the way yoga is marketed today, I also feel like it's really important for me to keep advocating that yoga is yoga in our community, and that it's thoughtfully put together. It's a collaboration between the students' experience and the teacher's knowledge and that yoga isn't about flashy clothing or flashy sequences, and that we're in the right environment for us as a student. It's not appropriate for all of us to do hot yoga or fast yoga, nor for all of us to be doing restorative yoga. Some of us need to be moving; some need to be more still. And I really feel, as a kind of senior yoga teacher in this community, I'm actually in a position where I can say something and make a difference as to how people experience their yoga.

So part of my life has always been about advocating for skillful use of means, whatever that is: words, yoga, meditation, food, ecology. And so I see myself in that position now.

### **Physical therapy, neuroscience, and the three nervous systems**

CHERYL: I am interested in where the physical therapy and neuroscience parts of how you do things came into the picture.

SARAHJOY: Mm. I'm happy to talk about that, yeah. Many, many years ago, I was invited to participate in CE courses that my physical therapy community was hosting. And I went as a student to see what they

were doing. And I learned a lot about pelvic floor function, which was very specific. And that's tied into the practice of yoga in terms of what we call mula bandha, uddiyana bandha, and so on. And I looked at the shoulder girdle with them, and so on and so forth. And following those experiences, they asked me to teach CE courses for them based on yoga as a science. So we ended up with a collaboration going back and forth for several years, where I was educated by my colleagues and companions, and they received some teachings from me. That also initiated relationships with several physical therapists in the city of Portland, where if I have a client who's in need of an evaluation beyond what I can do, we go see my PT together. If I have a client who's gotten as much as they can from yoga, but they still need some hands on support, I go with them to see the physical therapist. So I'm learning, I'm co-learning with my student. At times, my schedule doesn't let me go. So in those circumstances, I have a phone call between the PT and myself to find out how did it go and what was the benefit and what were the challenges. And I love to collaborate like that with professionals from all kinds of field. I love to collaborate in that way.

Neuroscience came into my life, and I think into our larger community as well, at about the same time. I went to Portland State University to study in their Interpersonal Neurobiology program, which is a phenomenal program for mental health providers and psychologists and so on. I went as a yoga teacher, which is probably a little unusual, though my background is a Masters in counseling and art therapy. I wasn't practicing art therapy at the time I went to the program. So I went as a yoga teacher. And I soaked up every piece of information I was exposed to there. And really specifically, I was jazzed by the continuous reflection from the teachers at that school, that in this field called Interpersonal Neurobiology, the neurological set point of the therapist acts like an antenna (my word) or a lighthouse (also my word) for the student or the client. And to the extent that I can generate the most positive nervous system state for myself, which is actually called ventral-vagal parasympathetic nervous system, if I can generate that for myself, I'm holding a space in which my student or my client can heal. If I'm not aware of my own nervous system in the company of my student, I might be sending off an unfortunate antenna vibe. Maybe I'm anxious about their circumstances. And what they're getting from me is unspoken anxiety. But if I keep my own nervous system on that higher frequency of equanimity and resilience, when I see students and clients, overwhelmingly, I just experience compassion and empathy. I'm very transparent with my students. We have a collaborative relationship. And in my counseling practice, I'm also able to self-disclose beyond what a clinical psychologist might do because my training is very different. I also want to self-disclose that right now my nervous system is experiencing this in your company. What might that be about either one of us? If my nervous system went from resilient and compassionate to anxious and shut down, was that me, or was it my student or my client? And how can we found out together what's happening in the reciprocity between the two of us?

Second to that, like a high point in studying the nervous system, was understanding that we actually have three nervous systems. We have many, but we have these three, not just the two that we were trained in high school, which was sympathetic and parasympathetic. Now we know that there are three. Ventral-vagal parasympathetic is the highest of our social engagement nervous system capacity. That's where we experience compassion and benevolence and altruism towards ourselves and also towards others. Just below ventral-vagal would sit sympathetic fight or flight nervous system. And below that is dorsal-vagal freeze or collapse/submit nervous system. So knowing that there are three nervous

systems, you also can start sensing where are you, what are your strategies when you feel threatened or overwhelmed? Dorsal-vagal strategies would include collapsing. Something like I like to say to my students, if I'm in a dorsal-vagal, psycho-socially, I'm going to withdraw, close the door, shut the curtains, turn the lights off, and I might turn on Netflix and get some macaroni and cheese and sit by myself until I feel numbed out enough that I could tolerate the world again. That's like a dorsal-vagal response. I'm not particularly prone to dorsal-vagal. But I have a lot of empathy for where people choose that from and why. Sympathetic response might be like fight or flight. And you can picture that fighting either with other humans or with your circumstances or with yourself. Yes.

CHERYL: [chuckles] I'm raising my hand in total uh...um what's the word? Yes. [giggles] Yes.

SARAHJOY: Yes.

CHERYL: I get what you're saying.

SARAHJOY: You resonate with that one.

CHERYL: I resonate, definitely.

SARAHJOY: Yeah. And flight could be like when the cats are having an argument, and they hiss. And then they dash away from each other. But they need a lot of adrenaline to do it. So sympathetic dominance requires a lot of our adrenal reserves. Both sympathetic and dorsal-vagal profoundly suppress our digestive, immune, and endocrine systems. And then we have symptoms. If we didn't know that our nervous system was doing something, by the time we have digestive, endocrine or immune [symptoms], we know something has been off.

So my personal strategy when I'm overwhelmed or frightened or I find that my resilience has gone down, my personal strategy now is to see what do I do to nudge myself towards a ventral-vagal response. Now, I said before I grew up in a household that was more vacuous. It wasn't about relationship. Even though I'm an identical twin, it wasn't about having deep relationship. My sense of myself in the world was you have to do it alone. You know, I'm raised in America too. So we have this ultra-independence stance. So when I'm stressed, historically my response is I can push through this, I can do it. I can put my nose down and make it through. And I have a lot of strength. And I'll make it happen. And I'd been using that strategy for some 30 years by the time I went to PSU for this course. And I realized a higher, more elegant strategy for me would be to turn to relying on others when I get stressed. That means seeking out empathy, compassion, kindness; learning how to delegate. I love collaboration. And when I'm stressed, could I reassess how we're collaborating and make it work better for all of us? Rather than, in the spirit of collaboration, let me just take over, which isn't really collaboration.

So it gave me a chance, being back in school at PSU, gave me a chance to really look at my own strategies and refine those, and refine them according to my physical capacity, having been in a significant accident. And refine them according to my Ayurvedic constitution. Knowing that Pitta, my main constitution, will go out of balance towards drive and independence and urgency, and it'll get things done. But that's not always the wisest path through life. So as I had life experiences, and I've been

exposed to my own aging process, I've refined how I approach my life based on what I now know about Ayurveda and neuroscience. And it makes all of my relationships that much more easy going and fulfilling, including the one that I have with myself. So it's been very gratifying to have life events that become opportunities, rather than disappointments. They're all opportunities, from my perspective now.

CHERYL: These things that you're saying, you know, you and I have never talked about them in this way before. But everything that you're saying, it makes perfect sense. I see where you're coming from. For instance, when I took your class, the group class, the way that you talked to the class was slightly different than the way you talked to me when I took individual lessons from you.

SARAHJOY: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: Which I always felt like, wow, Sarahjoy is just meeting me where I am. You know, I tend to be very crude and impolite, and I cuss a lot. And I noticed that you'll use an even more casual language with me in the private lessons than you did in the class. And to me, that always felt like you're actually in this room with me. You know, sometimes, I don't know if I speak in a crude way, and somebody responds in a certain way, I feel embarrassed: "Oh, I shouldn't have done, oh my gosh. I'm so impulsive. And I'm so rude." And then I'm spiraling.

SARAHJOY: Yes!

CHERYL: And I have no idea how you feel about that kind of language. But you certainly have never flinched when I have used cuss words for absolutely no reason. I have no idea why I've done it. But I always got that sense from you of wow, I am not being judged. This person is just happy to be here with whatever I'm presenting. And you're use of humor too. I just. I don't even know how to explain that. But you can feel it in your body too, when somebody is using that kind of humor that's so sweet and funny and biting at the same time, and you feel very welcome and yeah.

### **Non-judgment and outgrowing shame**

SARAHJOY: Well, my fundamental stance in life is non-judgment. And truly, we might say if you look at the teachings of yoga, there are these practices called Yamas and Niyamas. And the first of those is Ahimsa. That means non-violence. And when I teach yoga philosophy to my students, I remark that Gandhi practiced only one of the Yamas and Niyamas for his life, which was Ahimsa, non-violence. It was his entire practice. For me, non-judgment is my foundational practice. Judgment leads to separation, which leads to isolation or competition or envy, and sometimes to ill will and pity. And I've seen the dark side of those things in human nature. I also know my own inclination to be hyper-critical or judgmental towards myself. Prior to meeting up with the path of yoga, it was really severe. I mean, the amount of shame that I exposed myself to by my own inner dialogue in my early life and up through about 25 or 26 years old was really severe. You can read about it in my book, which is called "[Hunger, Hope, and Healing](#)." I didn't say it earlier. Outgrowing that shame voice, let me say optimistically, it is possible to outgrow the voices of shame and criticism. We may have to go through a period of co-existing with those voices before they diminish more. But it is possible to outgrow that sort of unfortunate and repetitive and relentless is the word I'm looking for.

CHERYL: Yep!

SARAHJOY: The relentless voices of shame, you can outgrow that. So because of my own commitment to that, when I meet humans, I really do meet them with a fundamentally non-judgmental stance. And should they experience shame, I understand it. Should they experience a little wit, I understand that. If they experience frustration, I understand that too. And I really see it as here's our human condition expressed through you, expressed through me, but fundamentally a shared human condition.

CHERYL: Mmhmm.

SARAHJOY: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: Going on what you were just saying, do you think if someone is spending a lot of time in that dark place, and if you have those relentless thoughts, and you're acting on them, will you put your nervous system into that state that's out of balance, by your behaviors?

SARAHJOY: Yes. You will. Your nervous system is waiting to respond to any threat, real or perceived, internal or external. So I'd say most of us are struggling more often with an internal threat, and it's a perceived threat, not a real threat. And that internal threat is our own voice dialogue about and with ourselves. And that will put you in a sympathetic or dorsal-vagal dominance. Yeah. It's very expensive to talk to ourselves that way. I mean, the cost to your health is great. The cost to our nervous system is great. The cost to our relationships is great, too.

CHERYL: Yeah. And it just feeds.

SARAHJOY: It does.

CHERYL: It just all feeds itself. I've noticed that sometimes I might get upset over some little thing, and once I'm upset, then I start thinking of 20 other things I could stay upset about.

SARAHJOY: Yeah.

CHERYL: I'm not consciously choosing to do that. But I'll notice, wait, hang on one second. Now I'm just going through a string of terrible memories for no reason. Stop that. And I can move on to something else. But it takes a lot of skill and power to notice that you've done that

SARAHJOY: Yes.

CHERYL: and pull yourself out.

SARAHJOY: Yes.

CHERYL: Oof. Yikes.

SARAHJOY: Yes.



## Yoga for social justice

CHERYL: We were talking about neuroscience, and we were talking about relationships and compassion, which are things that you bring into your yoga. There is another reason that you practice and teach yoga that I don't hear about very often. Because I do hear a lot of yoga teachers talk about compassion. But what you also bring to it is yoga as a powerful tool for social justice. And I'm so interested in hearing you talk about this because I think it started when you were practicing art therapy. Something happened that led you into social justice work through yoga. I would love for you to talk about that.

SARAHJOY: Yeah, yeah, it's been a lifelong commitment. I mean, I said earlier that my constitution is Pitta. And Pitta can drive. And that my personal nervous system response when I'm overwhelmed would be to fight through something, to persevere. If you look at fight, flight, freeze, and submit as all having a liability, they also have an asset. And the asset side to fight is to advocate, to know how to advocate. And advocacy is a life skill that not all of us have the fortune to develop. So when I was working in the mental health field as an art therapist, one of my responsibilities was to help try to keep the center funded by the state of Massachusetts, which is where I was living. And I took my clients, who had chronic and persistent mental illness and lived in a residential home for the treatment of that, I took them on the subway down to see the Governor. We went several times to City Hall. That is not an easy task to do with seven or eight adults who have chronic and persistent mental illness and go speak to the Governor about the need for budget support for our center. Well, the state of Massachusetts was making a much bigger funding cut than I had any knowledge about. And I was just 22 years old at the time. But our program was cut. It got closed down. And my clients became homeless individuals who, many of them had been already forgotten by their family members because the significant illness that they struggled with was so great that family members didn't know how to cope. And this was 1992. So we didn't have the same resources we have now. Like NAMI might have existed. But I didn't know about it at that time.

When those people who were dear to me, who were also clients and residents of the home, when they became homeless people, my second thought for them was they would likely end up in the criminal justice system, which I already knew wasn't a criminal justice system. It's a criminal punishment system. So that affected me in a very poignant way. And I actually left the field of counseling and went to backpack and go hiking around the country by myself, sort of like the soul-searching that you could do at 22 or 23 years old without any other obligations in place. By that time, I'd been hiking since New Hampshire was my launch to hiking. I'd been doing it for several years. And my own recovery from disordered eating was much stronger. I felt I could manage this journey and have it be a psycho-spiritual adventure. And it was.

While I was out in the world that way, I saw more and more what it means to have privilege or not to have privilege. I'm a Caucasian female. I'm from lower-middle class, more like lower-middle is kind of an exaggeration there. But my availability, still, to resources was greater than the average person. And my availability to mental resources was also greater than the average person. I happened to be a straight A student. My sister was the high school Valedictorian. I was the Salutorian. That means the second chair. And I did great in college. I had really good study skills. Like, I could think clearly, I could plan, I could take action. But out on this backpacking trip, I met a lot of people who otherwise couldn't have. So

where I was adventuring included some of the most beautiful places in our country and some of the most challenging places in our country. And as I was exposed to the diversity of what that was, I saw less and less social justice and more and more injustice.

I had a fortuitous foray for four years to live at Breitenbush Hot Springs as a result of that backpacking journey. And while I was living there, I drove weekly to Salem, Oregon to pick up supplies for Breitenbush. And I drove by the prison that's on Highway 22. And more and more, I was exposed to the privilege that I was having to live at Breitenbush, which is a significant privilege. You only get to have about 50 people living there in residence year-round. I saw the people who came to Breitenbush had the resources to come. I saw the demographic of who we were at Breitenbush: very few people of color and very few people of any kind of poverty. The walk of life that we came from to go to Breitenbush was relatively homogenous. So my calling then became to teach yoga in prison.

And I saw yoga as a means for social justice because what yoga is capable of doing with our bodies and our brains in the company of a teacher who's compassionate and present with you, what yoga is capable of doing in that moment is really rewriting the narrative of who you are. And I mean this in these numbers of ways. One is how I see you as an individual changes how you see yourself. So I'm already rewriting the narrative. I don't see you the same way that our culture sees you. If you're marginalized or you've been shunned or you're institutionalized, I don't have the same perspective that our culture has on you. So to me, you're not a number, you're not an institutionalized individual; you're a human being. So if I, as the teacher, see that, how you see yourself will start rewriting your own narrative going forward. It can also rewrite the narrative that's historical. Because how you see yourself in the context of your life starts to change. As well, when you start breathing and moving your body, it changes the narrative of the physical body, which is carrying the held history of what we've lived already. Now, that held history can become like good compost. It can help to produce the garden of your life going forward. Or it can become stagnant, toxic held patterns that we feel some loyalty to because they happened to us. But that loyalty is misguided if we really want to cause transformation on our own behalf or on behalf of others. It's also misguided if we want our families to heal. So being loyal to the body patterns that would have kept me frozen wouldn't have been loyalty to my family because they would have also stayed in the same dynamics that we had growing up. That is to say, any one of them could've taken the path of healing. I happened to be the first one out in my biological family. So when I saw that change my family circumstances, I also saw this could be possible with anybody else on the planet.

The third way that I see yoga as a social justice tool is that when you feel like you have access to internal stewardship or leadership over your brain, your mind, your body, your breathing, your heart rate, you start to have a sense that you could empower your own life from the inside. And people who live in the margins in our culture don't usually have the feeling of empowerment. Those who live in institutions or behind prison walls don't have a sense that they're empowered. And so this internal sense of empowerment became very important to me. When I train yoga teachers in our yoga and social justice teacher training and to volunteer any outreach programs that we teach, I'm always speaking to them about how to create the inner leadership of the student. There are four qualities we teach for that leadership. They come from an epic yoga story called the Bhagavad Gita. They are sovereignty, dignity, humility, and belonging: essential qualities any one of us can re-embodiment in our lives. And then, we become that lighthouse or antenna for somebody else, whether it's your cell mate or the grocery clerk

or the person you're waving into traffic ahead of you because you see their humanness in the car next to yours.

So that's really the cliff notes version of yoga and social justice, including my own personal history with it. I hope that's helpful.

CHERYL: Yes, very helpful.

### **Department of Corrections yoga teacher training program**

CHERYL: And in fact, you know, with that history that you just described, then in 2014, the Department of Corrections contact you.

SARAHJOY: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: Because they were looking for a program to develop confidence and life skills to incarcerated people with developmental delays, people with traumatic brain injuries, sensory-motor deficits, and other conditions that people have that left them vulnerable to exploitation within the prison community. And I'm sure vulnerable to exploitation outside the prison community too, but also within.

SARAHJOY: Yes.

CHERYL: And they wanted a program to address this. And they thought that your yoga program could address it. And then they took a huge step forward and worked with you to set up not just about teaching these incarcerated persons yoga but to train them to become yoga teachers themselves, who were qualified to work with other incarcerated persons who live with developmental delay or traumatic brain injury as well as other vulnerable populations. So it's just incredible how many layers that has to it. Not only with leadership and stewardship in a marginalized population, but these are populations of people who larger society doesn't think they ever can be leaders of themselves or anyone else. So tell me everything about this program!

SARAHJOY: Well, I had been teaching yoga in the prisons since 1998. I'm the founder of Living Yoga, which is a prison outreach program that brings yoga to prisons as well as drug and alcohol rehab centers. And so the Department of Corrections knew about my work since the year 1998. Since 2012, I've been working with my second non-profit, which is called the [DAYA Foundation](#), D-A-Y-A. It means Delivering Accessible Yoga Alternatives. And one of our programs has been for the officers at the prison, to help them develop greater resilience and some skill-building and self-management, is one of the words that they like to use. I prefer "self-stewardship" as a word. In light of those two programs, the DOC contacted me, yes, last year and asked me if I'd be willing to conduct a teaching training program in prison for incarcerated persons to learn how to be yoga teachers.

Now here in this country, to be a yoga teacher and be "certified"--we're not licensed, but we are certified--there's an organization called the Yoga Alliance. They are like this big umbrella that houses all the schools of yoga that can certify teachers of yoga. So we went so far as to create a certified teachers' training program. That means that when these incarcerated persons are learning to teach yoga in this DOC program that I'm teaching, they will also be certified to teach yoga when they get out, which is

phenomenal. So they're getting a life skill, a professional skill, and a job inside the Department of Corrections. So we're going to be at OSCI, which is Oregon State Correctional Institution. We'll train about 20 yoga teachers there in a 200 hour program. And those 20 teachers will then be able to teach yoga to their community. Actually, the ones that we've chosen to train, they had to apply for the training. They're really invested in the prison community. That is their brothers on the line, the other people who live in cells and who have long-term sentences there. They've been there a long enough time now to have practiced yoga. And they'll be there a long enough time to make a difference in the community going forward. So those to whom they're going to be teaching yoga do have developmental delays and traumatic brain injuries and some sensory-motor deficits. What we've found is that having leadership over your own mind or stewardship over your own body is challenging enough in prison without also being the sort of person who's vulnerable to wanting to please others, wanting to make friends, wanting to be included. And you get included by unknowingly breaking a rule in the prison because somebody more manipulative or filled with coercion than you are asks you to do something on behalf of their own agenda. Then both the vulnerable inmate and the inmate who was more capable of manipulation, they both get consequences. So the prison leadership team that includes the Religious Services Department, the Life Skills Department, and some of the officers that were watching this happen, they came to me and asked me about this program.

We have 10 volunteer yoga teachers helping to facilitate this program so that each of the 20 trainees is going to get one-to-one direct attention about how to be a yoga teacher. We will train them on understanding the science of the brain, both in the average citizen's experience of their brain and then what is it like to have your brain live inside of prison walls for so long? And what happens when you have a traumatic brain injury or developmental delay? And what are the sorts of developmental processes that can be interrupted? What can be regained? From the incarcerated person who's now the yoga teacher, how do we create that where they're not internalizing a sense of power over the other incarcerated person, but rather collaboration with? And how will their nervous system become a lighthouse to the other nervous systems, which is the phrase I use to describe it to myself, as I said earlier. So it's a really significant undertaking and one that I'm very honored to be a part of.

It'll be the only teacher training that I've ever done where it's all men. Because we have an overwhelming number of female yoga teachers in our community, we have 10 female yoga teachers helping 20 male incarcerated persons learning to be yoga teachers. So we're also going to be looking at the gender issues and really putting it on the table, like this is a dynamic that we're going to be experiencing. How do we use this dynamic as an educational opportunity, given that when you get out, you could have a different gender balance class than you're going to have when you're in prison. And the people who applied for the training and with whom we've approved of them to take the training, they are in the position in their prison community where they've already demonstrated leadership, compassion, interpersonal respect, and some ability to have self-stewardship, enough stewardship that they understand the difference between that and coercion or manipulation. So these are students that you wouldn't recognize if they walked into your yoga class as an average citizen. You wouldn't know that they had come out of prison. In fact, we've had several people rejoin the yoga community here at the DAYA Foundation who were formerly incarcerated persons. And you wouldn't know the difference. I take that as a sign of how much we can grow and accomplish when given the opportunity to do so.

## Adaptive yoga for people with disabilities and health conditions

CHERYL: Just then, you were specifically talking about the stewardship and leadership and having a job and having these job skills. But there's also a lot--yoga is just really hot right now in terms of the brain injury community and people with disabilities. It's just, it's really popular for a lot of reasons. A lot of what I hear about it the benefits of improving your balance and your equilibrium, improving your strength, stamina, flexibility, breathing. Which I experienced all those improvements by doing you know 5 minutes of yoga every couple of days! You know, I used to fall asleep after a 10-minute yoga routine. I was just so exhausted all the time.

SARAHJOY: Yeah.

CHERYL: But it did improve all of those things for me. And like you talked about, it can improve your overall self-care and your perspective, your peace of mind. I mentioned earlier I took your adaptive seated yoga class for a while where I think I was the youngest person in that group [giggling].

SARAHJOY: I think you were, yeah.

CHERYL: People with a range of experiences and a range of abilities, and there were people with different types of disabilities in the group too. But I loved the class. And I think I told you about this. There was a couple times that someone there asked when I was going to move up to the harder class.

SARAHJOY: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: And I get told all the time that I look really fit. And I look fitter than I am, physically.

SARAHJOY: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: This adaptive class, you don't actually run it as beginning level and lemme crank you all through so you can get to the "real" yoga class. You don't have this let's win at yoga kind of attitude. And so I'd love for you to talk about the adaptive yoga and your philosophy around that.

SARAHJOY: Yeah. And this will circle back around to an observation that you made of me several minutes back as to how I am in the classroom, which is slightly different than how I am with you in a private lesson, based on who you are as an individual. So one of my foundational values for the adaptive yoga class is that we all experience ourselves as capable of yoga and doing it together. I say that with those emphases because there's so much happening in the yoga community right now that excludes people who have any limitation. Even if they can't touch their toes, they can feel, "Oh, I can't do yoga. I'm not flexible enough." Someone can't do the lotus pose, they might think, "I can't do yoga." So I'm looking at it as an opportunity where we all, anybody who comes to the class, is capable of doing the practice as I'm teaching it that day. And that includes mindfulness and breathing and simple movements that people can feel successful with and the sorts of movements that I know are capable of reorganizing the nervous system from the inside out based on using your diaphragm to breathe, using your mind to have that quality of stewardship or mindfulness over your own thoughts, and creating postures that change your nervous system regulation by not up-regulating into adrenaline and not down-regulating into lethargy. So I'm really looking at it very closely.

We use cross-crawl patterns in the classroom. I'm looking through the lens of Ayurveda so I know that what the imbalances or illnesses that people come in with, they reflect a certain constitutional imbalance. And I'm sensitive to that in the class as I'm teaching it. That means that I'm putting together like a potpourri of sorts to make the class happen. But everybody is important to me, and inclusivity is really important in that class. One of the reasons that that's so important is that we are inherently mammals. We were born with social brains. Your social brain and my social brain are in this dialogue together. But in the classroom, we're in a much bigger conversation with other social brains. Now, we're not talking during class. It's just that your brain is affected by the other 12 or 20 brains that are in the room and vice versa. And I see the yoga teacher's role as like the conductor of the orchestra. How will I make these brains harmonize together for this period of time? And how important is that for our sense of community? Even if the relationships only occur during the yoga class, but a sense of community happens for an hour and 15 minutes. That's so important to the ventral-vagal parasympathetic nervous system that we actually feel like we connect, we belong, we can participate. Dorsal-vagal biases isolation and withdrawal and social disengagement. So I see the class as really serving that fundamentally neurological perspective also.

My voice tone in the class has to have enough--it's a funny thing to say, but it has to have enough-- leadership to hold the class together. My voice modulation has to be where people who have hearing loss can hear me. [Uses higher pitched, thinner voice] So if I talk really nice and light about what we're doing with the yoga, and I'm very tender-hearted about it, I'm actually missing the voice tone that a hearing aid can hear me the best. [Returns to regular voice] And if I drop my voice down to where it's actually more natural for me to project and maintain my own stamina while teaching, the hearing aids in the classroom can hear that. For people who need to see me to read my lips or need to have eye contact to figure out what I'm doing, I'm aware of who they are and where they sit in the classroom. Someone with a balance issue and a significant enough balance issue that we need to have an assistant with them, my assistant knows who that is now. And I send her over to help him or her. So I am orchestrating all of that. And I find it very renewing and joyful to do so. I don't see yoga as a competition in any way. It's really about camaraderie in this class.

CHERYL: Yeah. I do think the pop culture yoga promotes a sense of competition. You know, nobody in the class ever asked me, "This is adaptive yoga. Why are you here?" That never happened in the classroom. And I kept waiting for someone to be like, "You're in the wrong class." Not only did nobody ever say that, but nobody ever said, "What's wrong with you? Why are you in this class?"

SARAHJOY: Mmhmm.

CHERYL: So there's no sense of you have to take adaptive yoga because there's something wrong with you. It's about we're in this class because this class works, and like you said, I can be very successful at this adapted move. And I can still breathe while I hold it. And there's two assistants to help point out that my hand is facing the wrong direction, and I can't feel that or see that. And you turn my hand for me. Just a fantastic class. But I can definitely say, as somebody with different sensory processing issues and different cognitive issues around brain injury, that what people are saying about the benefits from yoga are very real and very wonderful. And to have that supportive and supported environment that

you create: everybody who's listening, if you're not in Portland, you should move here and take this class!

SARAHJOY: Thank you. Thank you, Cheryl. Yeah. The class grew from an initial two or three students to five classes a week at the request of students who wanted more yoga.

CHERYL: Oh wow. And a lot of them, don't they, they come multiple times a week.

SARAHJOY: They do.

CHERYL: Great, yeah.

SARAHJOY: Yeah. The students are very dedicated.

### **Supporting the non-profit work of DAYA Foundation and Living Yoga**

CHERYL: All of your work is non-profit. What's exciting about that is that means that anybody in the community can support it through making donations that are tax-deductible in lots of different ways. So I would love you to talk about what you're fundraising for right now.

SARAHJOY: Yeah. We fundraise for a number of specific things. One is to provide medical scholarships for students who take classes here at the studio. Medical scholarships are generally offered to persons who have cancer, Parkinson's, MS, or some medical condition for which their family budget is already overwhelmed, and they would not be able to afford a yoga class. Sometimes that person is taking a private lesson. And we need to get them a scholarship to come in for that one-to-one time that would be the most therapeutic intervention for them. If they can take the class, we prefer that they come to the class for the social camaraderie and have less sense of isolation about having an illness or a condition. But still the cost of a regular class may overwhelm their family budget. So we provide medical scholarships for people like that. We're also fundraising for the prison teacher training program. The persons who will be students in the program don't have livelihoods; they live in prison. And they'll need to purchase some textbooks on anatomy and other yoga concepts. So we're doing some fundraising for them to have the resources to purchase the books, which means we buy them, we give them to the students who are taking the program, they get to keep them in their individual cell. The prison will have one set of books in the library. But one set of books for 20 people to read in the library is pretty impossible to get enough time with the books to make good use of them.

We do an annual fundraiser called the Annual Sponsorship Campaign. And what happens with that is that people can make a donation on a monthly basis, anywhere between \$9 a month and \$108 a month. Or some people do more. We have \$200 or \$300 coming in from some of our community members. And those monthly contributions made over the course of a year really support the bottom line of all of our programming. And some of the programming is what we call outreach programming. So it's happening outside the walls of the studio. Right now, those programs are primarily in schools and hospitals. So we're at middle schools and high schools where the students have sensory-motor issues or anxiety issues or social anxiety challenges or learning differences. So we're helping them maintain their ability to stay in school in specialized schools that help them learn better. So those programs need some funding.

And the hospital programs are for chronic pain and what we call metabolic syndrome, which means a person might have a number of conditions all wrapped together like heart disease and diabetes or obesity and fibromyalgia and heart disease. So metabolic syndrome, chronic pain syndrome. Those classes are being held at Legacy Medical Group in two or three locations in the city right now. And our presence has been requested at a couple other hospitals too. So the fundraising supports the outreach programs to have an outreach coordinator and a volunteer coordinator. Most of our staff here is working part-time, and that means they have other jobs for their livelihood too. And they're doing this work here out of some personal passion and commitment to our mission and vision. All of my work at the studio is pro bono. As the founder, I'm giving my time and resource and intelligence as I can to the Foundation. I do earn a livelihood of my own in my own private practice on the side. So it's not that I'm giving everything and have nothing. But I do give a lot to the Foundation because I believe in the work that we're doing. And I think it's important that people understand what we give as staff and board members and community members is towards the mission and the vision, and we still have costs that overwhelm what we can do in spite of that. So that's why we fundraise: to keep everything moving.

### Contact information

CHERYL: Would you tell folks where they can find you both in the physical world and online and how they can go about either taking classes or making donations or just learning more?

SARAHJOY: Sure, yeah. So they can find the yoga studio at DAYAFoundation.org. That's spelled D as in dog, A Y A Foundation dot org. And on our website, we include directions to the studio. Because our address is currently 0110 SW Bancroft Street, the 0110 confuses the GPS system. So please use our website for directions, not a GPS and not Google Maps at this time. In the event that someone is listening but they don't have access to a computer on a regular basis, our phone number here is 503-552-YOGA (9642), 503-552-9642. And if they wanna find me directly, I have a website. It's [SarahjoyYoga.com](http://SarahjoyYoga.com). Sarahjoyyoga.com has two "y"s: Sarahjoy, yoga dot com. And that's also where people could find out about the work I do in private practice for anxiety, addiction, and PTSD and about my book, which is called "Hunger, Hope, and Healing: A yoga approach to reclaiming your relationship to your body and to food" in case anything I said about my personal life or about that book is interesting to somebody who's listening to the podcast. They can come here and find help for that as well. Yeah.

CHERYL: Thank you so much, Sarahjoy.

SARAHJOY: You're welcome.

CHERYL: It's been such a pleasure to talk to you today.

SARAHJOY: I really enjoyed it too. Thank you.

[music]

CHERYL: Thanks for joining me for another episode of Stories from the brainreels. Find more handy info on brain injury and disability art and culture on my disability arts blog, [WhoAmIToStopIt.com](http://WhoAmIToStopIt.com).



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