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## Healing to My Soul

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I am an African American woman. I am an African American woman and a stroke survivor. I am an African American woman and a newbie yogi. I practice and teach yoga. I'm a newbie because I am still learning the craft through my teachers, my students, my meditation, and the energy (*shakti*) that flows all around and through me. I am an African American woman, a stroke survivor and a newbie yogi, and I am embracing the beauty and real essence that lies within me. I didn't always do that.

As a little girl, I agonized about what other people thought of me. Growing up in a mostly white, middle class neighborhood, in a society that spotlighted the fair skinned women over dark skinned women, I detested my cocoa-brown skin, an aversion that created thoughts of unworthiness. I lived with the constant whisper of *I am NOT good enough*. I never told anyone how I felt, not even my parents.

By adulthood, I had designed my *I-got-it-going-on* armor, even as my ego stoked the unworthiness fire. Then came 2008. I suffered a massive stroke that shook my world. Rehabilitation from that stroke forced me to wake up. The awakening continued as I began to practice yoga for my recovery. Yoga and its teachings helped me find a deeper knowing: I am not my body, not my false thoughts. I have a natural love and light within me. Ultimately, yoga began to transform and heal my body and soul as it planted the seed for my practice and teaching today.

### Many Moons Ago, Transformation Began

My yoga journey began in the early 2000s, 7 or 8 years before the stroke, when the first seed was planted. I was living in St. Louis, Missouri. In a store, I stumbled across a VHS tape called *Total Yoga*. Yep, VHS. That's how long ago this started. DVDs came out in the late 1990s, but I was holding on for dear life to my VHS player and tapes all the way through 2002.

Back then, yoga was foreign to me and everyone I knew. I saw documentaries of men in India doing advanced poses like standing on their heads while doing unusual things with their legs. The cover of *Total Yoga* featured a thin, Caucasian woman with an aqua tank top and leggings. Even though, the image certainly didn't look like me with my cocoa-brown skin, I still wanted to see what these yogis had to offer.

At home, I inserted the *Total Yoga* tape and pushed play. Sitting down on the couch like I was about to watch a movie, I observed...I learned...and I cracked up. "They want me to do that?" Then, I decided to see what I could do. I got off the couch and onto the hard, wooden floor. Ready to try, I restarted the tape and pushed play.

The poses were challenging, to say the least. But 45 minutes later, I realized that I liked this yoga stuff! The physical aspect of yoga hooked me.

At the time, my life consisted of working at a media agency as a media planner, attending religious events, going to the gym, and hanging with friends, which occupied most of my time. Yet occasionally, I would go home after a hard day at work, turn on *Total Yoga*, and practice my poses. The day just seemed to melt away after a yoga session leaving me feeling calm and peaceful.

Home was my happy place to do yoga. At night my tiny living room turned into a private yoga studio with my on-screen teachers and me. Home was where no one could watch or judge what I was wearing, question my religion, or call me spiritually trendy. I believed if people knew I was doing yoga, they would say, “It’s blasphemy,” “You have to be flexible for yoga” (which, I am not), or “You have to be white” (which, I am also not). For now, I was practicing yoga, safely at home.

I moved to Kansas City, Missouri for a new media planner job. Different city, but I maintained the same hectic lifestyle, and my ego continued the *I’m-not-good-enough* refrain. After a long, exhausting day, I would take off my shoes, put on pajamas, and pop in a yoga DVD. Slowly, through the practice, I stopped thinking about my unworthiness, and I felt free, even if only temporarily. I loved my time as a home yoga student!



Figure 1 - Silent and Serene. Feels like Bliss (Photo Credit: Ruby Jordan)

### **Abrupt Change**

On August 13, 2008, I had a stroke and my world came to a complete standstill. I was experiencing a pounding headache that sent me to the emergency room via ambulance. Later, I found the right side of my body was partially paralyzed. It was like half of my body was asleep every second of every day. Additionally, I had aphasia from the stroke, a loss or impairment of the power to speak. I could visualize what I wanted to say, but the words just didn’t come.

Now, I didn't realize I had had a stroke, and it would be a full month or two before I grasped this concept and the consequences. I think my parents told me I had a stroke, yet I couldn't, or maybe wouldn't, comprehend it. My image was at stake – my health and life didn't register on my Richter scale.

The stroke reintroduced my unworthiness syndrome. Initially, I only worried about what people would think of me, or say about me. Oh, I smiled or laughed, droopy face and all, sending the message everything was fine, but nothing could be further from the truth. Speech malfunctioning from aphasia, I merely smiled and said, "Okay," signaling that I'd be fine.

My parents moved me to Columbia, Missouri, where I grew up and they currently lived, so they could follow my treatment closely. The rehabilitation center in Columbia monitored me throughout my recuperation. I worked to get to my familiar life again - Kansas City, the job, the church, my friends. Familiar, even though it felt like a masquerade.

I worked with therapists five days a week (inpatient care) and 2-3 days a week (outpatient care). Speech therapy started me out slowly by naming objects (cat, apple) and saying phrases (nice day, feeling good). Occupational therapy was slowly strengthening my right arm and hand (wrist, hand, finger flexions and extensions). Physical therapy got me walking again (exercise weights and recumbent bike). Although these therapies were arduous, I was determined to get my woeful life back.

Then, on November 2008, a mere three months after the stroke, I was fired from my job for *medical reasons*. I was numb. I cried, which elicited mixed reactions from my parents. My father thought crying meant starting the healing process. My mother tried to comfort me by saying healing was my priority, not the job.

It was the first time I cried after the stroke. I sobbed because I knew I wasn't dreaming – the stroke was real. I asked myself, in this moment, "What is happening to me?"

The age-old *I'm not good enough* mantra was back with a vengeance. That cocoa-brown little girl in me was saying unkind things about me. Not only did she speak out about my dark complexion, but she was now saying things about speech impairment, right-side paralysis...the ugly word: *disabled*. Yet, a wild notion came to me: honor and love myself. I wanted and needed to honor and love ME, not honor what people said about me or that negative voice in my mind.

### **Healing in the New Beginning**

Some people said it was a fluke. Looking at my life now, I say it was a blessing because I was slowly beginning to wake up. I faced an internal question: What is the purpose of my life? The purpose would come slowly in small steps. Step one: rehabilitate my body – for me. Step two: re-acclimate my mind – a new way of acknowledging my situation each day. Step three: restore and nourish my true self, my spirit.

I don't know why I had the stroke, other than a scientific doohickey clot (mass in the brain caused by antiphospholipid syndrome). According to Mayo Clinic (2017), antiphospholipid syndrome "occurs when your immune system attacks some of the normal proteins in your blood." Whatever. My immune system got me into a jam; however, starting my world over was an honor. I was alive. No matter the challenges and shortcomings, I was breathing with a functioning mind.

Doctors, therapists, family, and friends all supported me in my rehab. Two years of therapies and I did improve from walking on my own with a limp to saying something other than

“okay”. Slowly, I was waking up to my new world, and mini-step by mini-step I was beginning to love a speck of my inner self.

Still, I longed to go beyond what I was doing at the rehabilitation center. I went downstairs in the home I was now graciously sharing with my parents, and came across a DVD: *AM & PM Yoga for Beginners*, and a yoga mat. Although I hadn’t done yoga since the stroke, I wanted to try. So, I began, with my mat on the carpeted floor, and a conviction that I didn’t have to do yoga *perfectly*. I immediately felt discouraged but realized I could be thankful for the poses I could do.

Every time I got on the mat, I did the poses I could, even *modifying* some of the poses. Yes, modifying. I believed modification was a bad thing, but I did it anyway. For instance, to do a modified twist on my back with my right knee down, I held my weakened right hand in toward my chest instead of out to the side.

In 2012, vitalized by my therapies and home yoga, I sought out an *official* yoga studio with real live teachers instead of those video yoga teachers I knew so well. Healing meant stepping out of my comfort zone into a gentle yoga class on Fridays.

A white, thin, flexible woman was the gentle yoga teacher. My unworthiness stepped right in, but then she calmed me by leading me into a yoga space where everyone was equally honored. In this 60-minute yoga class, the insecurities of my color and disabilities slowly disappeared, even though outside the studio my confidence needed more work.

The yoga teacher encouraged modification as a positive thing. Many students, aching bodies bright and full of spunk, modified poses frequently. The teacher honored my challenges. With my right-side weakness, I couldn’t do a downward facing dog inversion pose. She suggested trying to do a hands and knees table-top position instead. My teacher also gave me my first glimpse at meditation and breathwork, the spiritual essence of yoga. She led us into meditation on the breath, asking us to notice how we felt with the ebb and flow of the breath. Is the breath deep or shallow, stressed or calm? At home, I practiced a physical aspect of yoga (i.e. poses and movement). Yet, in the studio, physical AND spiritual realms were beginning to blossom. I wanted more.



Figure 2 - Look to the Heavens with Modified Side Plank (Photo Credit: Ruby Jordan)

## Healing in the Unknown

I cherished the time I spent with my parents as I was rehabilitating; however, I thought I needed to spread my wings and see if I could fly. My sister was living in Atlanta, Georgia. She was a single mother, and needed a roommate and a sister. I also needed a sister and a safe space to spread my wings. In the summer of 2013, I decided to move to Atlanta.

Open-minded, I arrived in Atlanta where my younger sister opened her home to me. Here was my sister, my one-year-old niece and me – living. Despite feeling awkward in this new city, I was eager to find my place.

Two weeks later, my sister did an Internet search for yoga studios within a 20-minute radius from our home and suggested I contact them to inquire about their requirements. I was certain I could find something. I could have called, but I thought, with aphasia and physical issues, an in-person visit (complete with a smile) seemed preferable to a phone call. First stop, no one there! Okay. Maybe they're closed temporarily. Next stop, 15+ stairs to find no one there. With my limp, the stairs got the best of me, and I crossed that one off the list, and said, "No, thank you." Third stop, open for business, milieu questionable. Think African American woman, cocoa-brown skin, disabled: but see, white, skinny, young, and able to bend in half. I could feel my insecurities rising. Whisper, *not good enough*. Pure perseverance took me to the fourth studio, or tried to – I couldn't find it, so I gave up for the day. Deflated and crushed, I went home to mope.

A new day. I was going back to find the fourth studio that I couldn't find the day before. Kashi Atlanta Urban Yoga Ashram, miraculously, was right where the directions took me. Shyly, I entered – only 8 steps (later I learned they had a ramp) and suddenly, my world felt freer and brighter.

Two yogis welcomed me into this place where I felt instantly at peace. I explained my yoga history and challenges – stroke, weakened right side, difficulty with speech. I asked about classes I could take under those circumstances. I knew I had found my yoga home at Kashi as one yogi, a cocoa-brown-skinned woman – just like me – explained that most classes benefitted all levels of experience. She recommended not jumping into Yoga Blast or Yoga Boot Camp, which are high impact classes that a lot of able-bodied people wouldn't want to try. The other yogi added that I could modify any pose that didn't work for me. Modify...that word again.

## Healing at Kashi and Classical Yoga Teacher Training

I was hooked and started taking four or five classes a week. I noticed that a few people of color were teaching or taking classes at Kashi. In Columbia, I was often the only person of color. A light inside of me turned on: we are beautiful. A little spark of essential acceptance came over me. The little girl who didn't like her skin began to truly embrace her beauty more and more. The energy was alive in me, though it doesn't seem adequate to try to put that feeling into words. Again, I wanted more. So, I met the founder of Kashi Atlanta, Swami Jaya Devi.

Nervousness made the aphasia creep in and take over, and though I wanted to speak to her, no words came. Finally, in a near whimper, I managed to say my name, utter "stroke", and tell her I could not find the words. I felt defeated. This radiant Swami welcomed me with open arms and told me she was happy I had come. She was planning to teach an alternate nostril breathing (*Anuloma Viloma*) to bring peace and calm. I knew I needed calm in my life. Aphasia directly correlated with my stress levels, and I believe she sensed that. Suddenly I felt a serene

energy as Swami looked into my eyes. I believe her eyes said, “You are worthy. You are loved.”

Now, earlier in my yoga journey, before the stroke, I was fascinated by the idea of being a yoga teacher someday. My internal mind (you know the drill – African American, cocoa-brown skin, and later post stroke, disabled) said it’s not in my cards now. When several teachers at Kashi suggested I investigate the 2014 Classical Yoga Teacher Training (CYTT), my challenges came to mind, *not* my desires.

Since there was no magical fix for my right-side weakness and I believed I had to be able to say my words *precisely*, I declined. Yet, other senior teachers asked me to reconsider, explaining I could deepen my own yoga practice whether or not I taught. Fearfully, I reconsidered. I looked at Kashi’s website to view the CYTT page. Two phrases intrigued me: “enrich and expand their personal practices” and “ancient spiritual roots of yoga” (2017). Even though I would definitely not be teaching yoga (so I thought), deepening my practice was exactly what I wanted.

I applied. I interviewed. I was accepted. Another new journey.

February 14, 2014, a mere six months after putting down roots in Atlanta, I started my CYTT course with 30+ colleagues. The next six months, I immersed myself in *asanas* (yogic poses), meditations, *pranayama* (yogic breathing), *kirtan* (chanting), *seva* (selfless service), a ton of homework (reading, writing, and coloring), and lots of deep thought. CYTT was a profound experience and I valued what I learned.

In July 2014, I became a 200-hour registered yoga teacher. My sister and niece came to the celebration. I did it.



**Figure 3 - Gentle and Strong with Modified Warrior II (Photo Credit: Ruby Jordan)**

## The Journey Continues in the Present Moment

Swami Jaya Devi and the Kashi yoga teachers taught me that regardless of my challenges, I am enough. I'm a classical yoga teacher *today*, challenges and all – it is not the aphasia-free and a strong arm and hand future I envisioned. I teach yoga to help people believe everyone is beautiful in their own way, radiating from the inside out. I joined the Kashi Atlanta yoga teachers in late 2014 as an apprentice, and eventually a regular yoga teacher. At first, I was nervous. Slowly, I improved. My words came more easily, and I could cue poses without performing them.

In the three years since, I've taught public and private gentle classical yoga where modifications are welcomed and honored. I openly share having a stroke almost a decade ago, and reveal my continued challenges with poses. I modify every time I get on the mat as student or teacher. I also share with students the importance of listening to the inner self and ask them to modify any pose that doesn't work for them. Some students have knee issues in easy pose, for instance, so I suggest a blanket or block to sit on for elevation or guide them to straighten their legs. Some folks have wrist challenges in cat and cow pose. I suggest students use fists on the ground instead of supporting with full, open hands or sit in easy pose to move into cat/cow.

Once, a student was physically tired and unable to do some of the poses, but was willing just to be present. I asked the student to sit in easy pose or child's pose with eyes closed, breathe deeply and visualize doing the pose while sitting or lying still. A plethora of modifications exist in yoga (Google "yoga modifications"). It's not a cop-out to modify. To modify is to get the same benefit, and still have what's right for the individual. "Cherish your body, mind, and spirit," I say to my students, "Live the challenges and triumphs." Every day, I try to take my own advice, and I am beginning to cherish all of me.

I am an awesome African American, cocoa-brown-skinned woman, a stroke survivor and a newbie yogi, and I am embracing beauty and the real essence that lies within me. I am grateful for my path, my journey, for all the successes and setbacks – large and small. *Namaste*. The light in me acknowledges the light in you.

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**Tawnja Cleveland**, a certified 200-hour classical yoga teacher in Atlanta, Georgia, provides nourishment for women overcoming challenges. She enables yoga students in their discovery of love, peace, and health both on and off the mat. As a speaker and a blogger (www.TawnjaCleveland.com), Tawnja advocates being awake, aware, present, and healed.