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## Race and Yoga

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## Coming Home

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### Prologue

I am a yogi. I practice, teach, and train people in the art of yoga. This was not my dream job, and I hesitate to call it a job at all. It feels more like a calling, as they say, or even my soul's purpose, at least for now. Though I live in New York, when I travel internationally for vacation or work, one of the first things that I do is locate a reputable yoga studio with senior teachers that I can practice with while in town. Yoga is a source of community wherever I go, and through my practice I explore what it means to feel at home in my own skin, no matter what is happening around me or who I am with. Unlike many yoga teachers who discovered yoga in a studio somewhere, my yoga journey started at home in early childhood. My yoga journey has helped me to answer questions about familial relationships and community dynamics that were sometimes loving and at other times hurtful. In the end, this journey has led me to yoga as a practice time and time again, though it is often much farther away from my childhood residence and even a yoga mat. This essay explores some of these layers; it explores the powerful impact that living in relationship to others had on my self-realization as a yogi and a fully-expressed human being.



Figure 1 - Teaching at Solstice Times Square in New York 2015 (Photo Credit: Amy Hart)

## Coming Home

I love coming home. Home is where I feel safe and comforted, though it was not always

so as a child. At age fourteen, I ran away from home to a Connecticut boarding school in hopes of finding my fantasy home with Mrs. Drummond and the girls of the 1980s sitcom *The Facts of Life*, an unusual wish for a Black girl during the 1980s. Though my childhood home in Milwaukee, WI is where I felt seen and understood, it is also where I experienced my first instances of suffering, rupturing disconnection, and trauma. A complicated relationship with my father, who was also my first yoga teacher, was one source of that disconnection as was growing up in a city with deeply entrenched systemic racism toward African Americans. As a result of living in a fluctuating state of emotions with someone who was both a loving caregiver and a chronic stressor, it took many years before I developed a yoga practice of my own. Without tools to resource myself and find emotional balance during the occasionally feverish emotional pitch of my childhood home, and without knowledge and perspective that might illuminate the systemic forces that contributed to the depressed state for Black people in Milwaukee, I longed to disappear into what I fancied life could be: a playful place of joy and exploration in community with young women who looked out for each other. I achieved that feat by leaving home during my adolescence for my dream boarding school in Connecticut called Miss Porter's School. Since Miss Porter's, I have lived in California, Korea, and finally Harlem New York, by way of travel through the Caribbean, Asia, Europe, and Africa, in each place searching for a figurative "home" to call my own. Today, my yoga practice and profession as a yoga teacher has helped me cultivate the capacity to return to a "home" no matter where I stand, a safe, nurturing place in geographical, physical, emotional, mental and spiritual space and time.

My exploration of yoga embraces this ancient form of technology as a primary tool for maintaining connection to "home" (as the word yoga as "union" suggests), as it were, even in the face of adversity. Through *Ashtanga* yoga (the eight-limbed path), the yoga I practice uses posture, breath, and universal guidelines for living in harmony with self and others. With concentration, sustained attention, drawing in of the senses to focus on my internal experiences, and elimination of suffering, I can mindfully (in the tradition of a more secular Buddhist meditation practice) explore being truly awake and non-judgmental for the full spectrum of my life experience. Though my initial relationship to yoga was complicated because of my father, Milwaukee community, and events in my life that have swirled and twirled from extreme anxiety to joy and gratitude, today I understand yoga to be one of the tools that helps me connect with elements of myself that can ground and keep me awake in the present time instead of ruminating about the past or getting swept into future fantasy of what should be. In contrast to a commonly held perspective of yoga being a method to escape or disconnect from the harsh realities of life, one that my father also imparted to me at first, my aim is to teach my diverse population of students in both age and racial background how to use yoga to connect, to harness their resources (both inner and outer) to be well within, even when circumstances around them might be tough. Yoga has real value as a tool for social and emotional impact when explored like this because though we may not be able to change the circumstance of our lives, yoga offers practitioners tools to change how we *respond* to the circumstances of our lives in ways that either support a harmonious experience of being in the world or in ways that further rupture, disconnect, or traumatize us.



Figure 2 – Central Park New York City (Photo Credit: G-man Photography)

### **My First Yoga Teacher**

His name was Geoffrey McCreary, and he is my father. When I was a child, he practiced meditation, song/chanting, and Sun Salutations in the family meditation room of my childhood home. In my father's view, home was found through integrating the mind, body, and spirit through discipline and study. My father found rigid refuge in Paramahansa Yogananda's *Autobiography of a Yogi* and his Self-Realization Fellowship Church as well as the teachings of Indian yoga guru Swami Rama, who founded the International Institute of Yoga Science and Philosophy in Rishikesh, after an overwhelming 6-month tour in Vietnam. He dedicated our family meditation room to "communion with the Divine" after concluding during Vietnam that forces beyond the temporal world must animate human beings for us to successfully endure the brutality of life. My father's hope was that we might explore our highest potential as human beings and as a family in this dedicated space.

Spending time together in the meditation room seemed completely natural and rational to me as child, and it still does. Before age twelve, I vaguely assumed that everybody had something like a mediation room in their house for the same purpose we did. Ours was furnished with deep red, gold, blue, beige, and black hues of a carpet that my father bought on a trip to India, a tall bookshelf filled with books representing nearly every spiritual tradition on Earth (and even a crystal ball covered by purple velvet), a wicker love seat with cushions against a wall, and an all-inclusive altar that did not discriminate among the deities and prophets enshrined there. It was remarkable that in this room the teachings of *The Bible*, *The Koran*, Hinduism, the Buddha and others abided harmoniously. The contradictions and similarities between the revered philosophical ideas these books held were open-heartedly welcomed.

My father also emphasized the sacred connection between body and spirit, asserting that the former housed the latter; he repeatedly noted the irony that most human beings spend their entire lives desperately seeking the sacred union with the Spirit of truth, light and love outside of themselves, not realizing that they carry it within them wherever they go. I was a very athletic



and active child, so my favorite rituals in the meditation room were things accessible to me like chanting and doing Sun Salutations (the only yoga asana my father ever actually did). Their purpose, my father explained, was to prepare a body to be healthy and strong enough to sit still and receive inner wisdom during meditation.

If it had been up to my Dad, the only education my siblings and I would have received would have been a spiritual education, and our final thesis would have been on the extraordinary feat of levitation so that we might develop the ability to extract ourselves from the chaos of this world. The prayers and meditations he taught me seemed to emphasize disconnecting from the reality at hand rather than using yoga as a tool to more mindfully connect to the truth of it. One example of this I'll never forget was the first time I went to Mexico with a friend. Ever focused on the spiritual heart of the matter, my father's advice was to talk to the Mayans about the Mayan calendar's predictions for the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, especially how to prepare to transcend the impending tumult it foretold. In stark contrast, my mother's always practical advice was to warn me not to drink beverages with ice cubes made from unpurified water in order to avoid getting sick while there. Perhaps my father's tendency to use spiritual wisdom for escape was because for him, many of life's realities included the trauma of neglect, abuse, racial discrimination, and deferred dreams that left him bereft and hopeless about his ability to affect his experience of living in the real world.

Being raised with this open-minded perspective on spirituality and living a vital life was in many ways a liberating gift given the religious conflict-ridden world we live in today. My father taught us to appreciate diversity in spiritual thought, rather than fear diversity in religious ideals, a pattern that continues to reinforce harm and suffering through the "othering" of one religion's ideals versus another's. My father planted the seed that union and harmony within the individual as well as the collective might be possible despite contradictions of diverse perspectives. He believed it so deeply, he sought his own version of "home" that he referred to as "enlightenment" as vehemently as any religious devotee might, often side-stepping development of important practical, personal traits like kindness, patience, and the empathetic listening so important to maintaining human connection in his relationship with me and the rest of our family. As a result, it was not until adulthood that I finally developed a yoga practice of my own that was not tied to the contradictory nature of my Dad's practice.

Like my father and a number of startlingly mean-spirited yoga teachers that I have encountered over the years, the concept of "taking one's yoga off the mat and into the world" and how we engage socially and politically, or simply "into the family, classroom/studio and community" can sometimes get lost on modern practitioners. As an adult, I realize that the sting of my father's painfully critical tongue, and the infrequent use of positive reinforcement when I faced a challenge made surprisingly deep wounds in my ability to maintain self-esteem and self-soothe. In recent years, even some of my choices of yoga mentors have revealed some karmic drama when I encountered disconnected and harmful teachers. Without intervention or exposure to alternative ways of being with each other, it is practically a guarantee that we inherit our parents' model of communication, manner of demonstrating love, and family values. In the Black community, our unique traumatic history of occupying the lowest rung of a racial caste system, too often perceived as inhuman in the eyes of those on the top rung of that ladder, seems to have contributed to many distorted methods for expressing love, affection, and even discipline

within some of our familial relationships. This affects how we attune emotionally to one another's needs. I have not escaped unharmed. For myself, learning how to attend to my quick temper or my biting tongue that sometimes mimics my Dad's is a constant practice. Today I choose my yoga mentors with caution and care. Through the wisdom, teaching, practice of mindfulness, and the activism of more recent yoga teachers and mentors, I am learning to be a yogi that truly supports union within and among her students, both on and off the mat.



Figure 3 – Teaching (Photo Credit: Aisha Tandiwe)

### **The Traumas that Shape Us Can Sometimes Break Us**

All told, it has taken three quarters of my life to muddle through the practice of yoga and its potentially revolutionary impact on my life as well as my ability to feel at home in my own skin. Despite his highest spiritual ideals, the trauma of racism that shaped my father's life may have broken his ability to realize his fullest human potential at times. Though trauma shapes most of our lives, with secure attachment to and emotional attunement to loving caregivers and other basic necessary resources like food, a home, an empowering education, a safe environment, and freedom, etc., our traumas do not have to break us. During my lifetime, I have learned to acknowledge and show empathy for the entrenched trauma patterns that my father inherited from his own father and an entire history of abuse and race-based trauma that began with the physical, psychological, spiritual, emotional rupturing caused by slavery in America and white supremacy the world over. In most ways, these patterns still run my father's life, having made healing and deep relational connection to those he loves, including myself, an extreme challenge. The architect of my first yoga classroom was also the first man to break my heart with a violently berating, belittling, and lecturing tongue, so that I have spent many years unpacking the unconscious pattern of choosing friends and lovers who seemed to both love and hurt me at the same time. The internal drama of attempting to reconcile a knowing in my bones (confirmed by my father's teachings) that I was a "child of the light" where truth, love, and greatness were my highest potential and destiny with an ingrained internal narrative that repeated "I'm not worthy," "I'm not good enough," "I'm not special," and that "I'm a fraud" eventually became unbearable.

No matter how comfortable my home appeared on the outside, the storm brewing inside my mind and heart made finding true peace anywhere impossible.

In an unconscious effort to find answers to these contradictory patterns of thought and behavior, one Christmas my mother and I researched my family's ancestry. We discovered ancestral bloodlines and connections that seemed to suggest that this is simply what human beings do: pass along our unhealed suffering and resiliency through our DNA to those we love. The stories that my relatives told by phone or in-person revealed degrading self-narratives and traumas that were many generations old, an inherited pain that was not merely my father's and not merely my own. Being physically marked by the symbol of darker skin, denoting we are among those who make up the Black "race" as descendants of Africans, it was easy to note the parallels in the migratory patterns, the occupational and educational choices or lack thereof, the injuries or illnesses of my ancestors on both sides of my parents' families. In every relative or ancestor's case, we saw their life's path was a direct result of either racism's wounds or their efforts to avoid enduring racism. It was revelatory to see that race-based violence, developmental trauma, vicarious trauma, the stunted human potential resulting from a lack of access to education and a personal or professional path based on choice, and that race-based poverty, familial breakdown, exclusion had directed the life paths of every single family member whose lineage we could trace. Though this process of uncovering my mostly "buried" ancestry is ongoing, even research in the field of epigenetics asserts that unaddressed severe trauma can be passed down to one's offspring through DNA, which may present itself in future generations as evidently as brown eyes or black hair. The experience of looking attentively at my own "home", to witness the fragments that make up its foundation, is an inherently yogic act. I could not heal what I could not see. I could not come home without locating or exploring what my own home was truly made of.

### **Awakening to Truth, Love and Compassion**

Over the years, I dug up vivid details about my father's painful childhood, including the inhumane racism he suffered as a Black adolescent and young man growing up in Wisconsin during the tumultuous 1950s and 1960s Civil Rights era. A few years ago, a fraction of his suffering was captured in a Milwaukee museum exhibit about the University of Wisconsin-Oshkosh riots in the 1960s called *Black Thursday*. This exhibit featured my father, the Black Student Union president, my mother (who was his girlfriend at the time), and my Aunt Sandra, among many others. What was intended to be a peaceful meeting with the president of the university to discuss the illegal withholding of federal subsidized loans and grants to Black students enrolled at the time resulted in the arrest of my parents and dozens of other Black students. They ended up spending some time in racist Wisconsin jails. My profound realization that my parents managed to take a stand for what they believed in their late teens and 20s during a period marked by the deaths of Martin Luther King Jr., Malcolm X, and John F. Kennedy continues to take my breath away. In my lifetime, there is not a single tragedy I have witnessed that compares even fractionally to the trauma that my parents endured during their adolescence and young adulthood. In light of the sense of hopelessness, helplessness and powerlessness my parents felt during deeply challenging years in America, I sometimes wonder if meditation became an obsession for my Dad, a therapeutic method (as narcissistic as it seemed to be at times) of ignoring or reinforcing his own trauma-induced behavioral and emotional patterns. My

study of Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), and the way it often leaves victims of trauma stuck in a repetitive, disempowered experiential loop, have made me inquisitive about my father's suffering. Most of my conflicts with my Dad fit into "textbook" descriptions of the challenges of being related to someone with PTSD. Cultivating curiosity about my father's experience led to compassionate and well-maintained, though loving, boundaries toward him and many other students and teachers that I have encountered in yoga studios who seem to have been led to yoga by similarly painful experiences. Yoga and meditation are teaching me to practice empathy toward all people and myself. Like all of us, my father has always done his best with the tools he has been given in a perfectly flawed and unpredictable life.

### **Yoga Reveals and Heals**

Through my first experiences of yoga asana in my early twenties, I began connecting the dots that revealed both ancestral and personal trauma by using my body as a resource. I first awakened to the ways my body mirrors traumas and narratives, as well as yoga's possibility to support resilience, during a hip-opener called "double pigeon" in Jonathan Reynolds' class at Yoga Tree in San Francisco. Jonathan would set a timer and tell us to sustain this challenging pose for a full five minutes. The first time, I wept and tears poured as if from a spout. I remember overwhelming physical sensations that ranged in quality from dull to throbbing, from prickly to achy. Class after class, as I held this shape for what felt like ages, many memories including those that were not my own came to me. I had a clear sense that I was weeping for more human suffering than merely my own. It was as if I empathetically united my personal experience with that of an unseen collective body of pain and suffering. I wondered if these people and vague faces I made out in my mind were my ancestors, or another version of myself in another space and time. The outpouring was like a keening without sound, like the cracking open of rigid emotional tension that yearned for centuries to pour out of my muscles, my cells, and even my DNA. "Whose pain was this?" I asked over and over again. I had no memory of being harmed so severely myself. Even as I write this, I am clear that it is not my rational mind that understands my experience in double pigeon to be the truth. It is through the symbolic significance of discomfort and the images that played in my mind associated with that suffering that led me to return time and time again to Jonathan's yoga class.

Those moments in Jonathan's classes were my first politically revolutionary acts. I was bold enough to observe the transformation of my own experience of deep pain to that of sweet liberation in a matter of minutes. The slow, deep, nasal breathing, the soft focused gazed, the grounding into the earth beneath me were resources that supported my ability to remain awake during this uncomfortable pose until the suffering changed or subsided. It was then, twenty years after my introduction to yoga with Dad that I began to understand the true power that yoga had. If it was possible, with the loving guidance of a skilled and responsible teacher to awaken my resilience, a power that comes from the wisdom, suffering, and resilience of those who came before me, then I found my soul mate. I had come home.



Figure 4 - My Saturday morning class at Harlem Wellness Center (Photo Credit: Crystal McCreary)

### Yoga as Self-Care and Political Activism

Yoga was my first truly intimate relationship. Finding home through yoga’s revolutionary power led me to visualize the transformative power it might cultivate within the larger community I served as first a school teacher in Oakland, CA and then later in the Bronx, NY. Teaching yoga to other people’s children forced me to refine my intent. I had to consider what larger life skills and measurable outcomes I hoped students would demonstrate. I hoped they would develop practices of their own eventually. The essential question that I kept returning to was, “How can yoga and mindfulness support me to find resource in my body, mind, heart, community, and planet?” By supporting my students to think about this question continuously during our practices and activities, I watch my students awaken and begin to discover their own “home”. One child or adult at a time, I watch students in my public classes in New York as well trainings, workshops, and retreats all over the world gain concrete tools for managing stress, for self-understanding, and for navigating the challenges of their lives. When these needs have been met, the possibility of my father’s hope for his children, his hope for us to awaken to the truth, light and love within so that our inner sense of wellness might powerfully impact exterior wellness, becomes real. Being well and seeing things for what they actually are enables one to act from personal agency, which means making mindful choices rather than acting impulsively in ways that may not be empowering. This kind of self-care is not merely transcendent and mystical stuff. It is healthcare. It is social justice. It is political activism. It is the possibility that our communities and world might one day become truly viable, and a welcoming home for us all.

**Crystal Noelle McCreary** is yoga teacher, educator, actor, and writer in New York City. She creates and holds safe spaces for people of color to heal, learn and build resilience in a world that often takes relentless hold of our bodies, minds, and hearts. Learn more at [www.crystalmccrearyyoga.com](http://www.crystalmccrearyyoga.com).