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The Yoga-Writing Connection

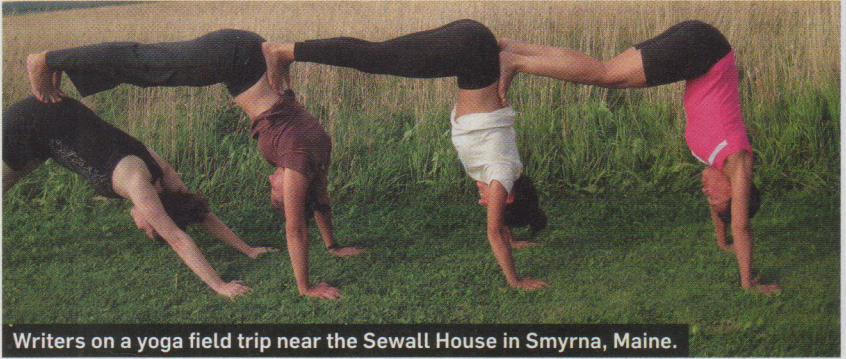
By Maria Massei-Rosato

MY DAY job in the financial industry, where I've worked for more than twenty-five years, has nothing to do with the literary life, but it pays the bills. For many years I worked late hours and through lunches so that I could maintain a part-time schedule, using my days off to care for my ailing mom and, later, my children. I found the

time to write between those moments of caregiving and providing. Years of this schedule, however, took a toll on my mental health, so six years ago I decided to do something about it. My company sponsors a wellness program that offers all sorts of classes, including boxing, salsa dancing, and yoga. That's how I met Donna Davidge.

Donna has been teaching yoga

for three decades. Her ancestors the Sewalls came over on the Mayflower. In 1845 her great-grandfather's family settled in Island Falls, a tiny town in northern Maine with a pristine seven-mile lake, soaring eagles, and singing loons. They built a three-story Colonial farmhouse in 1860. Donna's great-grandfather was an experienced nature guide, and in the late 1800s, a young



Writers on a yoga field trip near the Sewall House in Smyrna, Maine.

Harvard student named Theodore Roosevelt sought his services while recovering from the loss of his father. A lifelong friendship was forged.

Eighteen years ago, Donna purchased the home in Island Falls and opened an intimate yoga retreat. When she first mentioned her Sewall House retreat (sewallhouse.com) during our lunchtime yoga lesson in New York, I felt an immediate desire to be there, and booked a weekend stay. Island Falls hasn't changed much since Donna's family settled the town: It boasts a soothing waterfall evoking serenity in motion, a lonely tavern, a neighborly post office, a few churches, a restored house that serves as a town museum, a café overlooking the falls, and not much else. And that's just the point. The only distraction is nature.

On a typical Sewall House day, Donna leads us in morning and evening yoga sessions. The evening practice is always Kundalini yoga. In my non-yogi

terms, I describe it as a form of yoga that opens up the heart. In yogi terms it is considered "the yoga of awareness," focused on awakening energy to cultivate the creative spiritual potential.

Listening to your heart may seem counterintuitive to the writing process; writing requires thinking, neurons in one's brain working to formulate sentences that are cohesive so that readers may understand their context. My day job, however, requires that I spend so much time in my analytical mind that when I write, I want to write from the heart—from a space that is pure, like Island Falls, Maine. The Kundalini exercises create that space to listen to your heart. A surgeon friend of mine says, "That sounds too out-there for me." Then I remind him that I am simply talking about two human organs—the brain and the heart. Which would you rather have leading your writing?

It was Donna who first came up with the idea of offering a combination yoga-and-writing weekend. She would teach the yoga and I would teach the writing. It had been a while since I had taught writing workshops—for children and adults with developmental disabilities—so I welcomed the opportunity to refresh my teaching skills and offer writers something that had worked for me.

When we first began our yoga-writing workshops, I thought we had hiked into uncharted territory. It turns out, however, that some of the most well-known yoga centers (such

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COURTESY, DONNA



Writers meditate near Mattawamkeag Lake in Island Falls, Maine.

as Kripalu, in Stockbridge, Massachusetts) offer one or another version of yoga-inspired writing workshops. Author and teacher Dani Shapiro highlights the yoga connection in her latest book, *Still Writing: The Perils and Pleasures of a Creative Life* (Atlantic Monthly Press, 2013). Shapiro is a former professor of mine, so I reached out to her and discovered that she often incorporates yoga sessions during her

writing retreats as well. “I’ve begun to work both yoga and meditation into many of my writing workshops—even academic ones—because I think we writers easily become stuck in our heads,” Shapiro told me. “We sit at our desks for hours, alone in our rooms, and grow increasingly tense and constricted, even without realizing it. Our stories, as anyone who practices yoga will tell you, do not live in our heads.

They live in our bodies, and by quieting our minds, we can begin to find them.”

THE structure of our retreat at Sewall House incorporates writing time into regularly scheduled yoga sessions. After morning yoga and breakfast we gather around a picnic bench in Donna’s backyard, where I discuss a writing technique. Just before we go off on our own to apply the lesson, Donna leads us in a short meditation. Writers move to write in the space of their choice for fifteen- to thirty-minute sessions: Some write in the barn, others in their rooms. When we return, each writer has the option to read the work or some portion of it aloud, in a circle of sharing. Alternatively, the writer may just share the feelings experienced during the writing exercise. The writers consistently describe an ability to tap into something

different, a fresh openness to express their inner thoughts.

At this year's retreat, Brenda Ueland's *If You Want to Write*, published in 1938, served as one of my literary guides. In the book, Ueland encourages her writing students, "Be bold, free, and truthful." In one writing exercise, she asks her students to write a childhood experience from the child's perspective. When we were children, we approached life with a freedom to think, play, and write without a care in the world. We didn't worry about what others would think or whether something was right or wrong. Ueland's point is that to be truthful in our writing, we must allow ourselves to work from a child's sense of freedom and "disconnect all shackles, weights, obligations, all duties." Meditation and yoga allow writers to unshackle themselves from these kinds of burdens—the kinds that we carry with us into our writing process, and which so often prevent us from becoming fully present in our work, or from being able to work at all.

When conducting writing workshops, I'm always mindful that writers attend retreats for different reasons and with different skill sets. That's why when I assign a writing exercise, I almost always offer an alternative: Write a letter to someone alive or dead. If a student is writing to the living, I ask that she write with the intention of never sending the letter to the addressee. This simple intention sets the mind at ease, creating a space for the brain to relax and the heart to craft language that is free and truthful. Asha, the Sewall House chef in residence in 2013, successfully mastered this exercise when she wrote a letter to her dad. Her father emigrated from India and impressed upon his children the value of education in pursuit of a respectable career: a doctor, a lawyer, etc. Asha, though, felt the call for something different; at twenty-two, she's still searching for her authentic self, and during our workshop wrote a bold and heartfelt letter to her

father to express just that.

Later that week, while Donna was teaching our yoga session on a hill overlooking the lake, Asha was inspired by a bald-eagle sighting. She wrote about it after the session:

Eck on kar, sa ta nam, the mantra vibrates my chakras one by one, or at least it is supposed to. The sounds of us five women chanting the Kundalini mantra floats away in the wind, and I can't help but peek away from my third eye and deviate from my chakras. My spirit seems to be guiding me towards the present surroundings, and as I reconnect with my physical self, an eagle majestically swoops down towards the water, dips in the lake grabbing a fish, and then soars away. *Eck on kar, sa ta nam*. The words are still coming out of my mouth, but my arms are animated in excitement.

I didn't see the eagle over the lake that day, but during my first visit to Sewall House, a few years earlier, I did. I had hiked up Bible Point, so named because Theodore Roosevelt would take his Bible up there to read. The trailhead overlooks a narrow section of the lake. Just as I'd settled in to rest, an eagle soared overhead, its wings stretched in prideful grace. At that moment I thought of Roosevelt and how he must have seen countless eagles from this spot. Seated in a wicker chair in the present and watching the eagle soar, I connected with the past and, unknowingly, the future: Asha's eagle is a few years away.

Asha tells us about her eagle sighting as we head back to Sewall House on a pontoon boat. One of the writers asks Donna and me if we will continue our yoga and writing practice once we return to New York City. We look at each other. We hadn't planned to, but in that shared look we both recognize an opportunity to offer something with love—a way, perhaps, to find truth and freedom—in a place we both call home. ∞