

BACK INJURIES/BACK CURES THE ROAD TO RECOVERY: STORY OF LEAH HOWARD

By Maia Madden 30



When an athletic young woman is crippled by a back injury, she refuses surgery and turns to yoga instead. For an inspiring account of one woman's determination to heal herself, share the story of Leah's trials and tribulations along the road to recovery.

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THE ROAD TO RECOVERY: STORY OF LEAH HOWARD

By Maia Madden

It was 1976 in Poona, India, and Evlaleah Howard was just finishing an intensive four-month yoga program with B. K. S. Iyengar. She had learned a lot, but she was baffled by Mr. Iyengar's criticism of her. He told her she was too aggressive and arrogant in her practice, while she saw herself as a hard-worker and a perfectionist.

Leah, a dancer and a graduate of the Institute for Yoga Teacher Education in San Francisco, knew she had a swayback, but she was very flexible and strong, and she delighted in backbends. She did not realize to what extent she was relying on her lower back to achieve her high and impressive arch, or how much pressure her swaybacked posture was constantly imposing on her discs. And she did not hear what her teacher was trying so hard to tell her. On her last day, Leah asked Mr. Iyengar about the arthritis in her feet, a problem stemming from long years of ballet. Instead of answering her, he pivoted on his heels and walked away. Baffled once again, she turned to leave when she felt a tap on her back. Mr. Iyengar was standing behind her, and he said with a penetrating look: "If you keep on going the same way you are going, you may end up in two years unable to walk. You'll be in great pain, and the only thing that will help you is yoga."

When she returned to San Francisco, Leah began a full-time program in dance at Lone Mountain College. She also fell in love with jogging, and ran through Golden Gate Park every

day after dancing for four hours. "Soon I was running everywhere," she recalls. "I ran to the grocery store. I ran to the post office. I ran to class and I ran home from class." In the evening she practiced yoga and taught yoga. Leah also cared for an active nine-year-old son.

One morning, she awoke with a throbbing pain in her left hip and leg, but she denied it and continued her previous activities.

Soon she experienced sciatic pain, which is caused by irritation and pressure on the sciatic nerve near the lower spine, and her left leg began to feel numb. Massage after massage gave no relief, but Leah refused to believe there was something seriously wrong. "Then one day, I fell over a root while running. The next morning, I literally could not get out of bed." Thus began a two-year nightmare which would transform the beautiful blue-eyed yoga teacher first into a cripple and ultimately into a new person.

It was the middle of the semester. Determined not to drop out of college, Leah attended school on crutches and took notes while lying down. She could not sit, let alone dance. In the morning, she rolled out of bed and crawled on the floor to get to the bathroom. Her son and her friends helped her as much as they could, for sometimes she was in too much agony to move at all.

For a year Leah went from one specialist to another, trying to find out what was wrong with her back and how to alleviate the horrible pain. No one knew how. She saw a Rolfer who offered no relief. She saw a Chinese acupuncturist three times, but the pain came back as soon as the needles came out. She tried a chiropractor

and an osteopath, who both tried to realign her, but did not diagnose the problem. By now, her back was going into muscle spasms and each treatment only added to her agony.

"I was crazed with pain," Leah remembers, "and my life was dedicated to finding a doctor to help me. So far, the only help I had gotten was from a physical therapist who taught me how to sleep on my side with pillows under my waist, my head, and between my knees."

At least five doctors gave her medication, especially synthetic morphine, which deadened the pain somewhat, but left her in a drugged state. She was hospitalized three times for periods of over two weeks and put into traction for days at a time, with no results. Leah says that, "After a year, they decided to do a myelogram on me and discovered on the X-ray that I had ruptured two discs. They were ruptured anteriorly, and on the sciatic nerve. Being the largest nerve in the body, it was excruciatingly painful. Because a myelogram is so dangerous, it is used as a last resort. They shoot a fluid into your spine and hang you upside down, and if it seeps into your brain you can die. Doctors know very little about back pain or how to treat it. When the back is injured, it freezes. The muscles go into spasms and it becomes even harder to diagnose the original problem."

Because doctors would not explain to her exactly what a ruptured disc is, Leah did her own research. She learned that discs lie between the vertebrae, cushioning them and absorbing shock. They have an outer casement of elastic tissue and a center called the nucleus pulposus, which is filled with a fluid gel. After a rupture, the nucleus squirts out this fluid until none is left. This may take years and cause constant, extreme pain to the surrounding nerves. Eventually, the disc casing closes again, and the disc, now hard and unable to absorb shock, no longer causes pain. Surgery is done to scoop out the center of the disc, leaving some of the casement. The pain may leave, but over time the disc shrinks even more and is ground

away until the vertebrae fuse.

Leah was told that without surgery, her discs would wear away more quickly and never cease to cause pain. She would

be condemned to a sedentary lifestyle. "I was in the hospital for the third time when they gave me surgery as the only option. I knew I couldn't go for it. I said 'No. I want to leave. Good-bye.' I was actually scheduled for surgery and they thought I was crazy. They said that if I didn't have the operation, the scar tissue that was forming around the nerve would cause me to have a permanent limp. I already had a foot-drop and could not pick up my left foot and walk with it."

"When I was getting ready for surgery," says Leah, "I remembered what Mr. Iyengar had said that day. All along, the ordeal had seemed like a process to me. I didn't feel that some terrible mishap had occurred. I felt there was a purpose to all of it. I had done this to myself, and I was willing to learn from it. Being so motionless had made me start to come to terms with my aggression as a physical person."

All along, Leah had been corresponding with Mr. Iyengar about her injury. He wrote back with suggestions for asana sequences, but she was unable to do them alone. Finally Mr. Iyengar wrote: "I cannot see your back. If you want me to help you, come to India." Right away she told her doctors she was going to India, arranged for nine credits of independent study, and left her son with his father. On borrowed money, she boarded a plane for India. She stood during the entire flight.

On November 15, 1978, Evlaleah Howard, an invalid with a cane, limped to the entrance of the Ramamani Iyengar Memorial Yoga Institute in Poona, India. In her journal, she recalls that moment: "From the second story of the white, pyramid-shaped building resounded the familiar voice of Mr. Iyengar. Instantly, I felt elated, hopeful. My breath quickened and my heart pounded as I wondered how he would receive me. I lifted the latch of the ornamental gate and hurried through the beautiful well-tended garden which circles the base of the Institute. There was a perfect quality of timelessness and harmony about the place, as if nothing had changed



since my first visit. I slipped my sandals off, placed them in line with the shoes outside the doorway, and went inside. In the dressing room, I changed from my clothes to leotards and tights, noticing in the full-length mirror how thin and atrophied my once shapely, muscular dancer's body had become. Then I slowly climbed the long, spiral, stone staircase to the yoga space.

"Inside were about 30 men and women, both Indians and foreigners. Iyengar moved quickly about the room, pulling pupils into equally spaced positions in front of a raised marble platform. His appearance was striking: his face, stern and challenging, set off by thick, dramatic eyebrows, bore a resemblance to Hanuman—the half-man, half-monkey Hindu idol whose statue crowns the Institute. Hanuman, honored for his virtues of strength and incorruptibility, wisdom and bravery, celibacy and modesty, is depicted as a master of pranayama. Like Hanuman, Iyengar possesses a powerful chest from four-and-a-half decades of refining his practice of asana and pranayama. His sternum lifted, his back straight as a rod, he walked firmly on his feet, unpretentious, his dark brown skin gleamed over well-toned muscles. His eyes glanced with arrow swiftness around the room, not missing the movements of one pupil. There was a terrible, beckoning fierceness about him. At the same time, his eyes showed humor and a tenderness that held compassion, understanding, and acceptance, but only for those who no longer resisted his discipline.

"I waited obediently by the door, and observed him. Prashant and Geeta, Mr. Iyengar's son and eldest daughter, noticed me and beamed wide smiles. I raised my palms in front of my chest and bowed my head in namaste, and they returned the gesture. Iyengar, after looking at me several times without expression, approached me and asked me about my problem."

"So, what's wrong?" he asked.

"I have two ruptured discs."

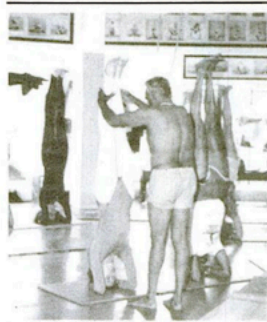
"That's not good," he said. "Do class."

Leah was horrified. He wanted her to take class with students in an advanced training program. She got out on the floor and could hardly do anything. She could put herself into a few poses because she still had some flexibility, but it hurt so much that she cried out loud. The entire time, Mr.

Iyengar kept eye contact with her.

"Somehow his determination that I should do the class was enough," Leah recalls. "There was no question in my mind that he would help me. He had often talked about finding that place, when you are doing yoga, where you are not swallowed by pain, but you're moving from the known in the physical world into the unknown. This means being willing to accept pain so that you can move through it, not be undermined by it. I was going to learn to do that with my pain."

That Wednesday night, there was the weekly therapy class for those



Mr. Iyengar adjusts Leah.

suffering from problems which had not responded to conventional therapies. Leah had seen Mr. Iyengar work with those who were in much worse shape than she was, but had never dreamed that she would need therapy class. She watched as Mr. Iyengar and his four assistants all worked with great speed and energy prescribing different asanas and exercises for each person. For Leah, Mr. Iyengar prescribed a series of poses that she was to do on a daily basis. He was very kind and concerned as he demonstrated the postures and helped her get into them:

- 1) Rope Hang—from ceiling ropes she hung backwards, with her buttocks braced by the rope and her arms extended to the floor. (She did this before and after each class.)
- 2) Rope Hang—from wall ropes.
- 3) Lying on a curved wooden box for several minutes.
- 4) Downward Dog (Adho Mukha Svanasana)—with her head on a bolster.
- 5) Mountain Pose (Tadasana).
- 6) Triangle Pose (Trikonasana).

7) Extended Lateral Pose (Parsvakonasana).

8) The Warrior Pose, I and II (Virabhadrasana I and II).

9) Intense Side Stretch (Parsvotananasana).

10) Half Moon Pose (Ardha Chandrasana).

11) The Plough (Halasana)—which was so painful that she had to be put into it and helped out of it.

12) Arching over a small stool.

13) Revolved Triangle (Parivrtta Trikonasana)—using a beam to twist and brace herself.

14) Another stretch over a beam, designed to place her body in perfect traction.

Mr. Iyengar emphasized that twists would help her considerably, bringing blood, fluids and movement to the injured discs.

Discs depend upon movement to bring them nourishment and renew their fluids, since after adolescence their blood supply diminishes. After an injury, movement is often so restricted that the discs are even less nourished than before.

In her journal, Leah remembers that class vividly: "Those poses which gave me the most discomfort, and toward which I exhibited the most apprehension, Mr. Iyengar was most adamant to have me pursue. He said, 'Your back has gotten all tight from the injury. We must stretch it without creating stress.' When I grimaced with pain in a pose, he said it was necessary to stretch the nerve, but warned me against overstretching my lumbar, which had been my prior tendency. He stood by me and slapped my buttocks downward into alignment, correcting my natural sway back. He said that movements made with a soft, loose lumbar had caused my ruptured discs.

"As he pulled me from one therapeutic exercise to another, Iyengar cautioned me: 'You are not to be a regular student here, follow? You must do every pose like a cripple, like a handicapped person, a paraplegic. Don't use your strength in the poses. Work as an invalid, understand?' While he demanded prudence from me, he also wanted perseverance in doing asanas.

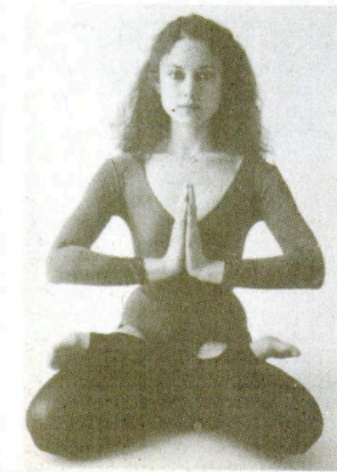
"I felt like a child who has committed a wrong and disappointed a parent. I felt that my ruptured discs

pointed to my incompetency, aggressiveness and arrogance as a student of yoga. I was a different person than I had been when I came to the Institute in 1976. My ego had definitely been humbled by the process of life, and Iyengar's response to me, which was kinder, friendlier, less hostile or cutting, reflected this."

At first, Mr. Iyengar stood over Leah and wrapped her gently in and out of poses, like a baby. He would tell her to stay in a pose for several minutes, and she remembers how the pain would make her cry. Sometimes he would teach a whole class while standing over her. "Or he would do the poses next to me, saying he was deforming his back like mine in order to find out how to heal me. He seemed to develop a subtle understanding of what my back needed at any given time."

"One day, Mr. Iyengar said to me, 'Put your ear to my back and listen,'" Leah remembers. "He did Revolved Triangle (Pariivrtta Trikonasana) and I heard a horrible crunching sound. He smiled at me and said, 'You see, I have the same injury. My back is just like yours.' He made me work very, very carefully. He made me come early and stay late, and I trusted him completely. I did yoga six or seven hours a day, and the rest of the time, I slept."

He also gave Leah a sweet-smelling oil which he said was very medicinal. She was to massage herself with it after a hot bath and then rub *shikai* powder, made from the fruit of a species of acacia found only in the jungles of India and Burma, all over her body. She was not to eat spicy foods,



which took a lot of will power because her mother is Indian and Leah has always loved hot curries.

The pain was usually worse for Leah after class, even if she had felt released during class. Friends would often carry her home because a rickshaw ride was too painful. Sometimes she would feel better and walk home, however, the next morning, she might not be able to get up at all. Then she would call for help, and the nuns at the convent where she was staying, or two friends who were also staying there, would get her up and carry her to school.

After a month, Leah felt stronger. Mr. Iyengar told her that the first step was to unlock her frozen back. She could not bend forward at all at first, but since the ruptures were anterior, backbends were relatively pain-free. The Rope Hang was slowly opening up her pelvis, and the props, especially the stool, were opening up her sacrum and back. The pain was lessening somewhat. "I had accepted that I was an invalid, and that I needed Mr. Iyengar's assistance," she explains. "The more responsive I was to him, the more information he gave me, and the better our relationship became. There was humor between us. I asked questions. We would laugh. He was sensitive to me, but he also demanded sensitivity in return."

"People in his classes, especially Americans, are always clamoring for answers to their little problems. They never think of what they can do for themselves, because they think he will give them a magical answer and their problems will disappear. They don't really listen to what he is saying. I think Mr. Iyengar would like his students to pay more attention and ask fewer superficial questions, to work more diligently, and resist hypochondria. But mostly, he wants them to be earnest, straightforward, and unpretentious."

"Many people are scared of Mr. Iyengar. They think he's egotistical and cruel, but he acts the way he does not only because he has that temperament (he's from Southern India where people eat hotter food and are more excitable), but also because he can control students that way. He has to, or they would control him. He's a famous and brilliant man, and people

are hungry for any information he can give them, but they abuse it and misuse it. They say, 'Iyengar told me this or that.' But whatever he says, you have to realize it's said in the moment to that particular person. It's not intended for everyone. He does not call himself a guru, but a man."

By Christmas, Leah felt she had actually gone beyond the level she had achieved in yoga prior to the injury. She was now doing forward bends with less pain and much more flexibility, and she was learning asanas she had never before attempted. "At the same time that Mr. Iyengar had been making me work very carefully and specifically, he would not let me sink too low. I was an invalid, but he made me feel that I had come a long way. I could now do things I had never dreamed I could do in yoga." Before long, he had her teaching twists and backbends "Before this, I had taught, but I was nervous about what I was doing. Now I felt confident, and I found that words and descriptions came easily. He had removed that feeling of helplessness in me."

Leah now knew that if she proceeded with attentiveness and without fear, she would improve. She was working intensely, still in pain, but with a new awareness and determination. She was told that the Shoulder Stand (Sarvangasana) sequence was a key to her healing, and she practiced it for hours. Even the Plough (Halasana) was no longer impossible. She had surrendered to yoga.

In January, Leah felt an urge to leave the Institute. Mr. Iyengar asked her to stay six months longer, but she missed her son and had commitments in San Francisco. During the last few weeks, Mr. Iyengar had given her many new exercises, especially intensive backbends, this time using poles and ropes to pull up her upper and middle back instead of her lower back, correcting her previous tendency. At her last morning class, he asked her to do asanas beside him. He wanted her to see that she could now do forward bends. Then he whistled for silence and told everyone that she was healed.

But Leah did not feel healed, although she knew her back had improved. The range of flexibility she had gained was astounding, considering she had been told she would

probably never dance or do yoga again. Yet she was frightened because, even though after many classes she felt pain-free, her back still hurt tremendously, usually in the morning. "I explained to Mr. Iyengar that the worst thing for me was sitting, and that I was terrified of being on the plane, being taken away from him and from yoga, and of having my back lock up again." Mr. Iyengar told her not to worry because he was going to invent a whole series of postures for her to do on the plane.

That evening before class, he arrived with a chair very much like an airplane chair. He was all excited. He showed her how to hang upside down, do twists in it, shoulder stands, backbends, everything imaginable. She was to do standing poses and twists in the bathroom, and Headstand in the aisle! "He told me to write a book on it called 'Airplane Yoga,'" Leah recalls with a laugh. For sitting, Mr. Iyengar recommended a modified Boat Pose (Navasana), feet resting on the seat in front of her.

After the last class, Leah sat with her teacher in the Institute garden and thanked him for his help. He told her that all he expected from her, or any of his students, was that they continue doing yoga. He asked her to teach others what she had learned.

The Air India flight to London was crowded. After the stressful journey from Poona to Bombay, Leah was hurting again. She did her airplane yoga and, since most of the passengers were Indian, she attracted very little attention, even while she did Shoulderstand in her seat and Headstand in the back of the plane! Arriving in London, she proceeded by train to her brother's home in Surrey. After an emotional reunion, she took a hot bath, fell into a comfortable Western bed, and slept as she had not slept in two years. When she awoke the next morning, the pain was completely gone. It was as if she had never been injured.

"It felt like a miracle," she remembers. "I was released, open, happy, hopeful." Looking back on the experience, Leah feels that Mr. Iyengar did heal her, not just strengthen her back. She feels it was less of a miracle and more the result of his knowledge and intuition. By concentrating on twists and bends, poses that brought blood and movement to her injured discs, he had helped her rebuild cells and had stopped the process of disintegration.

Leah returned to her active life, going to school, dancing every day, teaching and practicing yoga. She never jogs on cement anymore, because she believes this activity contributed largely to her injury. When she runs, which is very rarely, she stays on sand and soft earth, which are not so abrasive on the joints and spine. Only once has the pain returned. She injured herself during a dance class, and her back went into a spasm. Realizing she had again approached her goals too aggressively, she immediately rested and concentrated on her healing asanas until the pain subsided.

The doctors were incredulous at Leah's recovery. They insisted that there must have been some mistake in their diagnosis, even though her symptoms and myelogram had confirmed the seriousness of her injury. They warned her not to do yoga. Only one doctor, a well-respected orthopedist, listened to her story and believed it. He had had a ruptured disc years before, and, without surgery, had waited out the healing process with no adverse effects. He even told her he was now able to swim and dive just as well as before his injury.

Leah's back is not a perfect back, but neither is it like a back that has had two ruptured discs, or even one that has healed over. There is no evidence of scar tissue, which the doctors had told her would be impossible to avoid without surgery.

One day, when she was still in Poona, working with Mr. Iyengar, Leah realized that without constant yoga her back could become inflexible and painful again very quickly. "But Mr. Iyengar, I will have to do yoga forever," she said. "Well, then?" he replied. ★

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