

THE YOGA *of* CREATIVITY

A novelist explores the relationship between meditative practice and the creative journey.

By Anne Cushman
Artwork by Robert Mahon

A couple of years ago, about a month before my first novel was due to be published—and several months into an intensive meditation training program for yoga teachers that I was co-directing at Spirit Rock Meditation Center—I had two startlingly vivid dreams.

The first:

I am gliding and twirling around a roller disco, dressed only in a black velvet bikini and white fur-trimmed rollerblades. When I catch a glimpse of myself in a mirror, my first reaction is delight: “I look totally hot!” Then comes horror: “But what if I run into a Spirit Rock teacher while I’m dressed like this?”

The second:

My novel in hand, I have gone into therapy with a good friend of mine, a longtime teacher of yoga and Buddhist meditation. The session is held on the edge of a precipitous cliff. As the therapist tries to intervene, my friend and I keep snatching a microphone away from each other, trying to dominate the conversation. But then I tell my friend, with great intensity, “The only purpose of writing is to wake up.” So we hug each other happily and leave to attend a Buddhist yoga conference that is primarily populated by frolicking topleless flamenco dancers.

In the postpartum months since my novel’s publication, I’ve thought of those dreams frequently, as I’ve struggled to balance my dual identities as a writer and a yogini. On one level, the meaning of the first dream—a skimpily clad variation on the classic “naked in a public place” nightmare—was so obvious I had to laugh. My novel, *Enlightenment for Idiots*, was an irreverent, occasionally racy romp through the yoga and meditation world (“Imagine if *Sex and the City* were set in an ashram,” one yoga blogger wrote) that was getting great prepublication reviews. But obviously I was anxious: how would the book be viewed by my dharma community and teachers?

On another level, however, the dream touched on a larger issue, which the second one amplified even further. Apparently, there’s an intimate but cliff-edge relationship between two different parts of my own psyche, archetypal characters who still have some issues to work out. One is the yogic practitioner—devoted to using the tools of posture and breath and meditation to awaken to a reality that lies beyond words, that’s larger than the stories we humans endlessly recite about who we are, who we have been, and who we might become. The other is the storyteller—devoted to putting things *into* words, to spinning real and imaginary tales designed to entrance an audience with the



very dramas that spiritual practice is determined to transcend.

Both dreams posed a vital question, which artists on a spiritual path often wrestle with: what is the relationship between the creative process—wild, naked, unpredictable, uncontrollable, sometimes inappropriate—and the more restrained conventions of formal spiritual practice?

My own creative journey began at age two, when I made a remarkable discovery: If I held a handful of popsicle sticks, I could tell myself stories. For hours each day I lay on my bedroom floor, channeling waking dreams through these magical antennae. Age five: *twins who live on a pony farm with melted chocolate on tap in the kitchen sink*. Age ten: *a tribe of runaway children who hibernate in coffins high in the forest branches*. I was the youngest of seven children in an Army family that pulled up roots and moved every couple of years—Kansas, Korea, Kentucky, Massachusetts, the Philippines. Often, the characters who inhabited my stories were my closest friends.

For years after my family believed I had given up “playing with popsicle sticks,” I continued to pull them out in secret, with an intense, physical urgency: more than a day without storytelling, and I felt choked and uneasy. But at age fourteen, I left home for a Connecticut prep school on a windswept mountaintop, where the boys were required to wear blue blazers to class and the girls to wear short plaid skirts, and everyone wore shoes appropriate for yachting at all times. A roommate and a deluge of AP coursework left no time or space for day-

dreaming—and the popsicle sticks I had hidden in my sock drawer (the way the cooler kids hid vodka dyed green in Scope bottles) would not have enhanced my already marginal social standing.

Now I learned to dissect the structure and symbolism of stories in expository essays, rather than immerse in their world. I edited the school newspaper and won prizes for literary criticism. When I pulled out my popsicle sticks on my first vacation home, my storytelling was stilted, its trance tenuous. By the next vacation, the sticks had gone silent for good.

At an East Coast college, I tried to go back to my childhood storytelling game, which I had now learned to call “writing fiction.” I was accepted into the creative writing program and enrolled in a workshop led by a world-acclaimed and preternaturally prolific author. At the first meeting, I watched, awed into silence, as she flipped through the mimeographed submission of one of my fellow freshmen. “This sentence on page three . . . this could work,” she said in a soft, throaty voice. “And this one on page nine . . . this is passable too.” She pulled out those two pages and held them up as the rest of the manuscript fluttered to the floor. Looking from one to the other, she sighed, “You might have to write some sort of transition . . .”

I flailed on through a couple of anxious semesters, choking out cramped, self-conscious stories for excruciating dissection. Then I enrolled in a religion department survey class called “The Self in World Religions,” which I chose because it didn’t meet

too early in the morning. At the opening lecture, still red-eyed and blurry-headed from the previous night’s revelry, I heard my first teachings on Buddhism and yoga—an outline of the glimmering possibility of living a human life that was vibrantly awake.

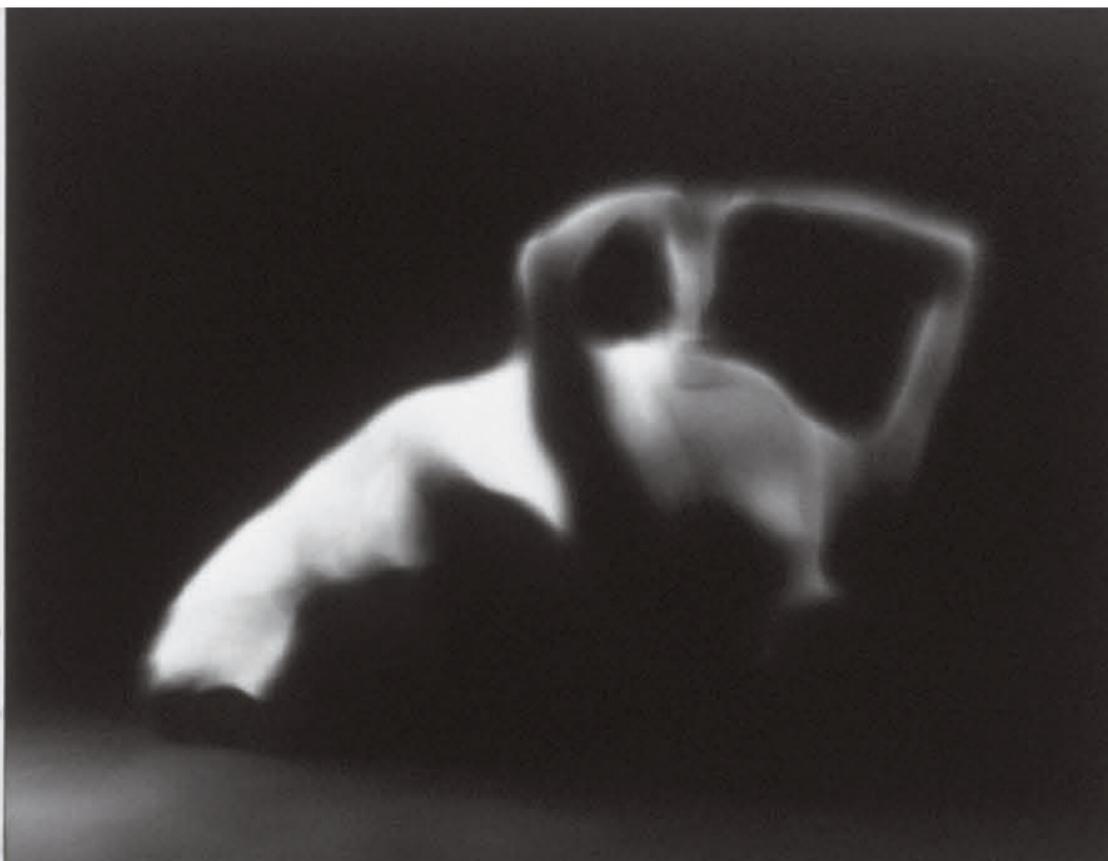
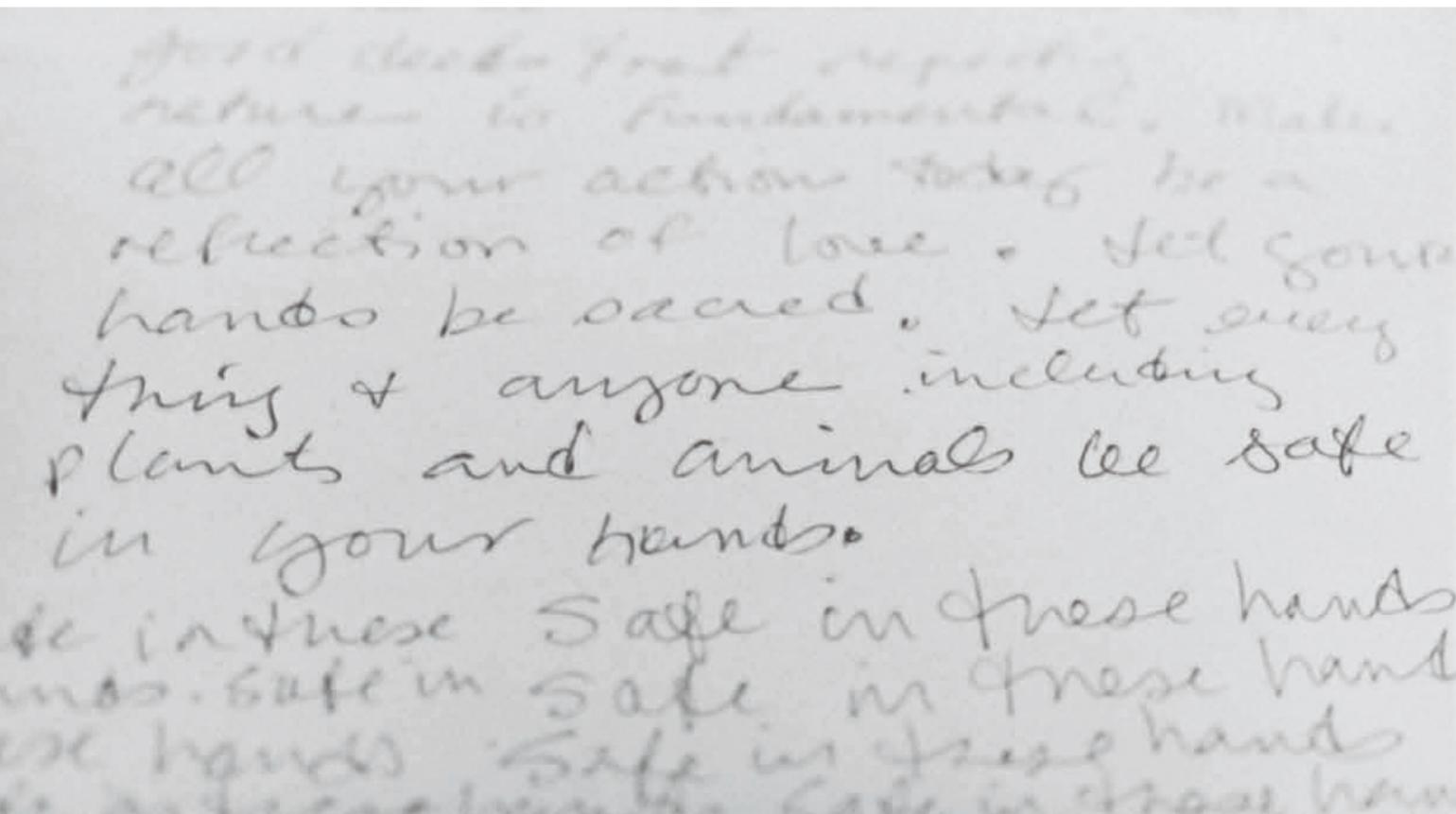
Within weeks, I had dropped out of the creative writing program and switched my major to religion. Obviously I didn’t have what it took to be a novelist. So I was going to study enlightenment instead.

Over the next few years, I began to practice zazen. I sat my first sesshin at the Zen Center of New York City, where my work practice was baking breakfast rolls—so all my sittings, however grueling, smelled faintly of cinnamon and yeast. I moved to Santa Fe and fell in love with yoga—and also, temporarily, with my yoga teacher, a six-foot massage-school student with muscles so clearly defined that he functioned as a walking anatomy text.

And then I picked up a copy of Natalie Goldberg’s just-published (and now classic) Zen writing manifesto, *Writing Down the Bones*—and worlds I had thought were separate came together with a thud of recognition.

I was living in a wood-heated adobe cabin buried in snowdrifts; my roommates and I had run out of firewood and money. We piled the contents of our file cabinets into the woodstove, and I did Sun Salutations by the brief heat of burning utility bills and college course notes. Then I huddled in a down sleeping bag, reading Goldberg’s book: “We are important and our

PREVIOUS SPREAD: STANDING FIRM. ABOVE: FROM FEET THE EARTH



lives are important, magnificent really, and their details are worthy to be recorded.”

So I scribbled with chilly fingers, filling a spiral notebook with details: How I met my yoga teacher in a blizzard for a documentary about Mother Teresa (an ascetic’s misguided notion of a great date movie). How I was wearing no underwear under my long black skirt, because I had hung it all out to dry on the clothesline behind my chicken coop and it had frozen solid, fringed with tiny icicles. How my ancient Impala slid into a ditch when I tried to drive home, so I spent the night entangled with him on his massage table, since he had no bed. How his room was filled with flats of wheat-grass, which made it smell like a pasture.

And as I wrote, I began to get it: writing could be a kind of yoga. And yoga could take me, not just to some disembodied enlightenment, but straight into the heart of my quirky, mysterious life.

In the two decades since then, yoga and writing have entwined for me, intimately as lovers, as pathways to awakening. And while I have studied with wonderful writing teachers along the way, it has been my practice of yoga (a term I use to include both the physical poses of hatha yoga and Buddhist meditation techniques) that has most helped me grope my way slowly back toward that uninhibited, storyteller’s voice that enchanted me as a child. Without yoga, I’m sure I couldn’t have written a novel. And I’ve come to see how inherent in yogic teachings are principles that can help anyone reclaim and cultivate the flow of creativity that is a birthright for all of us, whatever form it takes.

The word *yoga*, after all, comes from the same Sanskrit root

as the English word *yoke*—it carries the double meaning of “discipline” and “union.” Just as a yogi must return again and again to the mat or the meditation seat—to directly touch the reality of each moment—the writer must return to the empty page, the sculptor to the clay, the painter to the easel. And through this discipline, both yogi and artist become one with the worlds within and without.

From yoga, I learned the importance of carving out sacred time and space every day: of rolling out my mat, sitting down on my zafu, and picking up my journal, whether I felt like it or not. And once I’d entered that self-created temple, my practice space, like my notebook or computer keyboard, became a doorway to the infinite via the particular.

Yoga and writing both demand that I stay with what’s true and what’s present, however painful it may be—the sticky joint, the breaking heart, the ragged, unacceptable truth that needs to be spoken. To stay with it, but also to know that what’s true changes moment to moment, breath by breath. And that, in the very act of noting it, I transform it further.

Through yoga, I’ve gotten intimate with the sensual experience of my human life. I’ve come to know the details of my unique body: its race-horse nerves and supple spine; its hamstrings, tight from running hurdles and riding horses; its jaw, tight with family secrets and swallowed tears. I’ve entered cordoned-off inner rooms and opened to numbed-out feelings: a sorrow lodged in my pelvic floor, a quiver of energy in my spine, a liquid peace in the space between one breath and the next.

And I’ve carried that enhanced sensitivity and emotional range to my writing life, where sensate details are also vital: the

ROBERT MAHON, IN THESE HANDS

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sheen on the wings of a fly buzzing over the dripping juice of a pear; the smell of pennyroyal and eucalyptus by a cowpond after a rain, where a ponytailed man does taiji naked on a floating log; the long pause before a woman wrapped in a tangle of sheets answers her lover’s question, or doesn’t.

Yoga and writing, I’ve found, both depend on a delicate balance between structure and freedom, will and surrender. Through daily experimentation, I tested when to fine-tune the precise alignment of an asana or a paragraph—and when to let the perfectionism go and just surrender to the flow of energy. Through yoga, I cultivated the art of sensing *what wanted to move*—of trusting the subtle impulses that might be drowned out by my mind’s ideas about the form a pose or a story should take. I trained myself to listen to the shouts and whispers of my body—and then took that listening into the dream space of my novel, to hear what my characters had to say.

Both yoga and writing can lead me into direct contact with the present. But both can also remind me that the present is inextricably entwined with the past. Recently I read in an alumni magazine that my tenth-grade boarding school roommate—whom I hadn’t seen in a quarter of a century—had just died of ovarian cancer at the age of forty-five. I put down the

magazine, sat on my deck overlooking a mountain, and wrote down my memories of her: Her freckles, pointed chin, sharp blue eyes, and tangle of curly red-gold hair. The Wheat Thins and orange juice she snacked on as she studied Chaucer in her green flannel nightgown. How we skipped Sunday chapel together by hiding under our beds, dust bunnies in our noses. How one midnight as a prank, in a pointless gesture of defiance against an even more pointless rule, we sneaked out of our room to spray-paint orange footprints across the painted elephant on the asphalt driveway that only seniors were allowed to step on.

I wrote as a small, ritual way to honor her memory. And because I believe that writing enables me to touch my life more deeply—and that by sharing stories, I can touch the lives of others.

Well, that’s the theory, anyway. But then there’s the cramped reality of the writer’s life: The long hours staring at a humming computer screen. The neck that cranes forward as the head yearns irresistibly into the monitor. The shoulders that creep toward the ears. The breath that grows shallow and tight as the energy pools and throbs at the crown of the head. The visual field that narrows down to a square of black-and-white pixels.

Writing helps me connect with the world, I insist. But in order to do so, paradoxically, I must retreat from it—turn down lunch invitations from beloved friends, skip my son’s school field trip to the bronze foundry, ignore the unweeded garden and the unfolded laundry, pick up takeout Thai food for dinner because I don’t have time to make soup.

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T To participate in Anne Cushman’s discussion on creativity visit community.tricycle.com in September.

I hunch unshowered over my laptop on a rainy morning, dressed in a baggy sweatshirt with pesto stains down the front, as I send my imaginary protagonist to an Indian wedding in a turquoise silk sari. I munch handfuls of cashews without tasting them as the invented wedding guests savor chai redolent with cardamom and ginger. I slip into a disembodied world of words—and writing about a trip to the beach, no matter how eloquently, is not the same as feeling the squelch of wet sand between the toes, the cold swirl of waves around the ankles, the bite of salty wind on the neck.

So I turn to my yoga and meditation practice as a counterpose to the act of writing—to bring me back to my body, where life unfolds in the moment, breath by breath. But it's not so easy to switch off the narration in my head once I've indulged it all morning. After a day of writing, sometimes it's hours of yoga before I can feel my feet on the earth and my breath moving into my belly, before I can hear the song of my body past the din of the soundtrack in my brain.

For a long time after I finished my novel, I couldn't write at all. The compulsion to put things into words that had haunted me most of my life—*this is what I think; this is what happened to me*—appeared to have dried up. I was weary of words, weary of ideas, weary of the physical posture of writing. Could I write in a headstand, maybe? A backbend? A dance? I wanted to bake muffins, and hike, and paint my office, and vacuum a year's

worth of goldfish-cracker crumbs from the back seat of my car. When I did sit down at the keyboard, all I could record in my journal were concrete nouns: *Stone. Cheese. Maple. Worm. Thigh.*

I used to believe that writing was a way to create a kind of backup life for myself, to pickle reality in paragraphs for future consumption. I thought I could capture life's precious, fluttering moments in a net of words. But through yoga—and growing older—I know that writing can't trump impermanence. What I've mounted on the head of my writer's pin are just cocoons. The actual butterflies have flown away long ago.

Through yoga and meditation, I've seen that words are a flimsy narration floating on the skin of experience. The opinionated narrator in my head, with her endless attempts to recount and revise *The Fascinating Story of Me*, is not my true identity. So why should I glorify that thread of words by recording it? I couldn't remember the point.

So for over a year, I stopped formal writing altogether. Because if there's one thing I've learned through yoga, it's this: that it never works to bully the body, or the heart, into poses it's not ready to enter.

Instead I did yoga—and let my field of creativity renew itself. As I came to my mat and my cushion each day, I practiced letting go, turning inward, and trusting the natural rhythms of my being to move me toward wholeness. All I wrote down were

my dreams, scribbled each morning into a spiral notebook with my eyes half closed.

And a few months ago, as I lay in *yoga nidra*—the deep, relaxed wakefulness known as yogic sleep—a woman I'd never met before walked into my mind and began to whisper her story to me. I got up from my mat, picked up my dream notebook, and without thinking began to write the story down.

Since then, writing has come back to my daily practice. It's come back not as a duty, but as a calling—a chance to bow down to my life as it flickers past. And I've remembered that after all, I don't write to hold on to things. I write, as much as anything, to let them go.

Some days, my writing helps me touch the present more deeply. Other days, it takes me deep into my remembered past. Sometimes it reveals the world of an imaginary character—a world that, as I explore it, gives me a deeper understanding of my own.

In a single morning, a single sentence, I can evoke a Costa Rican rainforest, an Indian ashram, and a stable in Kansas. Or, as a kind of ritual, I can evoke a single, tiny memory of a friend who is no longer alive.

Such as this: My boarding school roommate, age fourteen, on a cold October night in the Berkshires. We're crossing the campus, furtive as spies, clutching cans of orange spray paint and cardboard cutouts of our footprints. As headlights light up the road, we dive for a ditch and lie on our bellies in dead leaves crunchy with frost.

We have no idea what lies in the unwritten decades ahead for us. We're ignorant of how fast time will pass, and how much we will ultimately have to let go of. We don't know yet about her career as an international banker; my marriage and divorce; her deadly cancer; my stillborn baby. We don't even really know why we are out there in the night in this absurd, small-scale rebellion. We lie in the ditch, damp and chilly, as the headlights pass over our heads and move on. Then we roll on our backs, look at the starry sky, grab onto each other's hands, and laugh so hard we cry. ▼

Anne Cushman's novel *Enlightenment for Idiots* was named by *Booklist* as one of the Top Ten First Novels of 2008. She co-directs a mindfulness yoga training program at Spirit Rock Meditation Center (www.spiritrock.org), where she teaches regularly on retreats, including the upcoming "Meditation and the Spirit of Creativity." For information about her writing and teaching schedule, go to www.annecushman.com.

The photo-collages by Robert Mahon are from a series, *Yoga and Trees, Glimpses of Satya Yuga*. Produced using chance processes, the light-filled photographs combine the majesty of ancient trees with the energy of yoga in an exploration of a spiritual path. Collages include text fragments in Sanskrit from the Rig Veda. Mahon's photographs are in the permanent collections of the Museum of Modern Art, the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Philadelphia Museum of Art, among others. His photographs are reproduced in two books by John Cage, *I-VI* and *Themes and Variations*. Visit Mahon's website at www.robertmahon.com.