



8 Ways to Save Your Life

Gardening, cooking, music, yoga, dance—life brighteners, yes, but life changers? You have no idea. **AIMEE LEE BALL** has some amazing case histories.

TRANQUIL AND UN-kinked after a good yoga class at a new studio, I mentioned to the instructor that I'd begun a yoga practice last year as an antidote to stress during a time when no arena of my life seemed unscathed and my body was so stiff with the physicality of tension, you could

have built condominiums on my back.

"Yes," she said matter-of-factly, "yoga saved my life."

It was one of those lightbulb, hit-yourself-in-the-head, I-could-have-had-a-V8 moments. Surely lifesaving goes on all the time in settings other than summer beaches and burning buildings and hospital ERs. I'm not talking about the worthy but prosaic kinds of physical

and emotional rescue, such as getting sober or going to church or taking antidepressants or having a mammogram or colonoscopy. What follows are testaments to the unexpected but undeniable healing powers of flora and fauna, of the kitchen and the classroom and the concert hall. All have provided literal or almost literal salvage, equal to any pharmaceutical. ▶

1 How Yoga Landed Her in Jail

GROWING UP IN LOS ANGELES, STACEY Sperling hit the trifecta of adolescent dangers: drugs, drink, and sex. "I was depressed but undiagnosed for a long time," she says. "I knew I was unhappy and things weren't right, but I didn't have the language for it. Only now can I look back and recognize the dysfunction." Sperling "fled home" and continued her risky behavior



at college. Today, at 37, she still feels what she calls "a big fat chunk of regret" for those years. "I shifted substances a little bit, but I blew off, slept through, was stoned through four years. Whatever sense of structure had existed at home went out the window. And I was so good at faking it. I would drop out, not call people back, create a lot of space between myself and other people. To be completely present with others, it's hard to maintain lies and secrets."

Under such circumstances, finding a career path was fraught with indecision and misdirection. "I knew I wanted to give to other people," she says, "but I could not figure out what to do with my life. I was always looking for what was going to save me, and I was always wrong." In a felicitous moment, Sperling auditioned for a graduate program in theater at the University of Texas in Austin. "I'd never even been in a play before," she says. "It was so clear I wasn't meant to be there." But the program introduced her to yoga, which was a revelation. "I'd had such a relationship with hating my body. With yoga, I could be in my body and feel good and not be high or drunk."

After graduate school, Sperling moved to New York with the man who would become her husband. Supporting herself at a series of unengaging jobs, she decided to train as a yoga instructor, taking classes nights and weekends. Something clicked. "The ancient writings seemed to be talking to me," she says. "I was doing this thing that I loved so much, and I had something to offer people. The more you connect with your breath in yoga, the more spacious you feel inside. And the postures themselves are designed to release tightness in the body. We store our emotional pain in our bodies. It's a practice that gives me an endless amount of hope—a space away from criticism, judgment, and negativity."

These days Sperling has extended her practice in an unusual way: Once a week, she teaches at Rikers Island, home to 80 percent of New York City's almost 14,000 inmates. The metaphor is not lost on her. "Yoga is about getting free no matter where you are, even if you're locked up," she says. "My practice is a lifeline. To be healthy enough to give to other people is being saved."

2 She Said So Long to Bagels and Cooked Up a New Life

WHATEVER DYSFUNCTION WAS present in Stefanie Fishbein's New Jersey childhood got played out around food. Cooking was an alien idea for her. "My relationship with my mother might have had something to do with it," she reflects. "She's a perfectionist, and I was probably afraid that anything I did wouldn't be good enough. The joke in my family was: Does Stefanie even know how to boil water?" By the time she was in the workforce (as an accountant for an entertainment company), she fell into a routine of fast food and takeout. "All I ate was bagels and chocolate," she admits. "On a special day, I might make a box of macaroni and cheese—that was throwing a gala event." By the age of 25, she was being treated for eating disorders.

The treatment program was a wake-up call for Fishbein, now 30, "but the part of it that really saved my life was grocery shopping two days a week. Not convenience store runs but real, healthy protein-dairy-vegetable-starch-for-the-week food shopping. Somebody was assigned to me who literally went with me through the store. Then I was taught how to put together a meal, easy and fast; how to use a paring knife; how to cut a pepper in slices. The biggest shock of my life: I was cooking. Working long hours, the last thing I wanted to do was come home and cook. But I've learned I can make myself a healthy meal in ten or 15 minutes. It doesn't have to be a big production, and it can still be satisfying. I eat everything that's natural: all proteins, all vegetables. I just don't eat pasta, bagels, and cakes."

Fishbein's revelation about food was really a rite of passage into adulthood, a hallmark of maturity. "What I've learned is that it's pretty simple to have food in the house and cook," she says. "It's another responsibility in life: You do your laundry and you go food shopping. Fueling my body properly has opened my life, fed my brain—my whole level of clarity is changed. There

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CONTINUED FROM PAGE 186 are times when that's hard and I'm cursing and stamping my feet. But I make the choice that this is what I have to do. The girls I met in treatment live all over the country, but we support each other. We bitch about how much effort the meal prep is—but we share recipes.”

3 She Plays to Win

IN PARTS OF EASTERN EUROPE, AS recently as 20 years ago, the key to staying alive could be someone in the family tending a garden in the countryside, putting away vegetables and fruits as a lifeline during the cold, damp winter. For Bella Hristova, that person was her maternal grandmother, whose home in rural Bulgaria provided sustenance but who was murdered on her way into town to sell the mushrooms she had collected. “When my grandma was killed, I was 5 years old and we lost that summer place,” she says. “My father had died when I was 4, so it was just my mother and me.”

The following year, Hristova took up the violin. “My mom always had a dream that her daughter would play,” she says. “My father wrote songs for children’s choirs, and my mom conducted those choirs—that’s how they met.” After studying with the same teacher for six years, Hristova determined to learn a difficult sonata called “Devil’s Trill” for a competition. “My teacher had a favorite student who wasn’t me, and that teacher said I’d never be able to play the piece. I’m quite stubborn—her remark actually motivated me. I won the scholarship, and the next day she kicked me out of her class.”

Searching for a way to have a dependable food supply, Hristova started traveling to the capital city of Sofia, three hours away by train, to play the violin in front of the Sheraton hotel. “At first, I was very embarrassed, ashamed,” she says. “Mostly there are Gypsies playing for money. But it was just what I had to do. And I wasn’t fiddling around; I was playing real music. I collected enough money to buy a summer house in a village called Izgrev. We’d take water out of a well by buckets and grow rows of strawberries, apples, pears, walnuts, melons,

peppers, tomatoes, cucumbers.”

Applying to another competition in the Czech Republic, Hristova met a music teacher from Michigan who was so impressed with her potential that he and his wife brought her to America, ultimately becoming her legal guardians. Now 20 years old, she is a scholarship student at the prestigious Curtis Institute of Music in Philadelphia, supporting her mother back in Bulgaria with the fees she receives from recitals and concert appearances. “I have a green card,” she says, “and I hope my mother will join me one day, but immigration is difficult.” Music is still saving her in various ways. “If I’m really angry and about to say things I don’t mean to say,” she admits, “I zone out with Mahler or Radiohead on my iPod.”

4 How the Dancer Tamed Cancer

DANCERS ARE NOTORIOUSLY HARD on their bodies, both physically and emotionally. The stringent standards of youthful perfection make them especially prone to a kind of self-flagellation about real or imagined flaws. So imagine what happens when that body is stricken by cancer and the mutilation of mastectomy.

But Elena Comendador’s 20-year career as a dancer actually provided ballast after her breast cancer diagnosis at age 38. “Dancing makes you feel very powerful physically,” says Comendador, now 47 and on the ballet faculty of the Ailey School. “It gives you that sense of movement, energy, life. Chemically, it produces something in you when you’re moving. As I matured, I realized how incredible the body is as machinery.” Breasts were an insignificant cog in that machinery. “I know I’m a woman, and that’s never going to change,” she says. “In dance one is celebrated when one doesn’t have breasts. The body is looked at as an artistic tool rather than something that’s always sexualized. The outer part of me was changing, but the priority was to get rid of the cancer.”

And then she went a step further, submitting to the harsh lens of a dance photographer. “I wanted to document the changes my body was going through,” she says. “I’d done research to see what the body looks like after surgery, and the



images were so horrible and ugly. I wanted to create another point of reference that wasn’t part of the medical industry.” When her regimen of chemotherapy was over, Comendador joined with a choreographer, Joy Serio Dunbar, to found DanceLife Productions, a nonprofit organization to promote awareness and support for breast cancer through the performing and visual arts. The first presentation, a multimedia dance theater piece, incorporates those post-op images of Comendador, uncompromising but beautiful. “It was a therapeutic way of dealing with breast cancer,” she says diffidently.

Comendador recently graduated from Columbia University School of General Studies. Drawing upon her major in women’s studies, she wants to create a grassroots health organization in the Philippines, where she was born, to help women deal with breast cancer. “There’s a traditional way of looking at bodies and gender: Either you’re a beautiful woman with two breasts—or you’re really ugly,” she says. “I think Victoria’s Secret should put out another line, for one-breasted women.”

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5 The Mark of Zorro

"WE MAY THINK WE PICK OUR DOGS, but I think they pick us," says Megan Wolf, 48, of Seattle. Eleven years ago, Wolf adopted a Great Dane named Zorro from the animal shelter where she was a volunteer. "His days were numbered because he'd been there twice," she relates. "I kept trying to find him the right home. I already had two other dogs, and I thought he deserved to be somebody's only dog, not my third. But he started to have eyes for me. One of the other volunteers pointed out, 'Every time you put a note on the bulletin board about him, he jumps up and pulls it off.' I was warned that he wouldn't have 'house manners,' but when I finally gave in and took him home, he seemed to know he was getting a special opportunity—he was better behaved than my other two."

Just months after she'd adopted Zorro, Wolf's husband left her—"a total shock," she recalls. And ten days before the divorce was final, her sister died of complications from a cerebral aneurism. "My parents were dysfunctional and had disowned me," she says, "and my sister was my family. Zorro was a tremendous support. We're parallels—somebody that nobody wanted. He senses when I'm sad about something. He knows he should be really active that day or just be there for me to cry into his fur."

Zorro had what Wolf calls "great charismatic ways," especially with the elderly and with children. "Whole troops of Girl Scouts were drawn to him. And even though he had a lot of energy, he was gentle with them. He'd hear a baby cry on TV and jump up to see what he could do." Wolf suggested Zorro for an animal visitation program at a Seattle hospital with a somewhat resistant board of directors. "There were scary issues—risk of infection, pee and poop and fleas. And there were people who thought, *What's this dog going to do that someone who's gone to school for 20 years can't do?*" But the results were convincing. "He'd already been there for me as my own therapy animal," says Wolf. "Now autistic kids make eye contact for the first time, or kids with



cerebral palsy walk because they want to play with him. Elderly patients come out of their rooms at the nursing home when they hear the dog is there. His tail thumps on the wall when he's excited, and he gives 'pawtographs.' They're much more involved with Zorro in the room."

Zorro's outreach has really brought Wolf a new kind of family. "I couldn't help my own sister but got to fill that need with others. And I've had life experiences I wouldn't have had otherwise." When Zorro got an award from the Delta Society, a nonprofit organization that promotes the human-animal bond, both he and Wolf flew to Boston, first-class, to accept the honor. "People talk about how lucky he was to get a good home, but I joke that if I found a man who would eat whatever I gave him and be happy with how I look and smell, I'd marry him."

6 When Nathalie Talks, She Listens

SHORTLY AFTER LAURA CHAMORRO started dating Aaron Sugarman, she tried to break up with him. On paper everything

about him seemed wrong—he was, for one thing, her boss at the travel magazine where they were both editors. He was Jewish, which she thought would be an issue with her Catholic parents, and he was what she calls "geek chic before the Internet boom made that conceivable"—not the blond football player people imagined for her.

"But standing there in my little one-room studio," Chamorro says, "I heard this voice in my head: 'If you break up, you will regret it for the rest of your life.' I thought it sounded like my dead cousin, Nathalie."

Nathalie had died at 23 in an automobile accident. "This kind of intuition runs on my dad's side of the family, the Colombian side—mostly they talk about my grandmother watching out for them. I went home to my parents' house for the weekend, marinating about Aaron and brooding over whether that was really Nathalie's voice or was I crazy.

"Looking at family photos is my dad's favorite thing in the world," says Chamorro, "and he started pulling out albums. As he turned one page, a photo shot out at an angle that physics would not predict and hit me in the chest, actually straight in the heart. I said, 'Did anybody see that?' Of course nobody had. So I bent down to pick up the image, and it was a young Nathalie, maybe 6 years old, sitting cross-legged, holding me as a baby in her lap. Nathalie could be petulant and harsh—her nickname was Nattack-aly—and I thought she was probably a little testy that I hadn't believed her the first time. Her voice in my head was such a blessing; it gave me the fortitude to withstand any disapproval when my relationship with Aaron became known."

It's a relationship going into its 11th year—the couple were married almost six years ago. Chamorro, now 35 and a freelance writer in Los Angeles, admits her diplomatic husband remains skeptical that her cousin spoke from beyond the grave, "but he's willing to entertain the idea that he doesn't know everything." Those of us who don't necessarily believe in such ghostly visitations might more easily entertain the idea of Chamorro's own inner voice.

"What it ultimately served to do was help me to trust CONTINUED ON PAGE 194

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 192 my own instincts," she says. "Whether it was Nathalie or my own intuition, ultimately it's knowledge of your right path. In Chinese medicine, they say the heart is the residence of the mind. If you follow your brain, it won't tell you which direction to go—you have to open your heart. If I had, I probably wouldn't have needed my cousin to come visiting."

The crucial photo is in a special place on Chamorro's dresser, along with one of Sugarman's brother, who also supported their union and also died too young. "Our own private saints," says Chamorro, "neither Jewish nor Catholic after all."

7 The Constant Gardener

SHANNON LANGDON, AT 32, IS DISARMINGLY direct about the health crisis from which she was literally saved. "I have schizoaffective disorder, which is manic depression with psychosis," says Langdon, who lives in Chapel Hill, North Carolina. "I was a graduate student in biochemistry and biophysics, but I had to discontinue my studies because the stress kept triggering my illness. For about a year, I sat in my apartment, didn't take phone calls, stared at the floor. I was coming out of a severe depression. I'd had shock treatments. I was very, very sick."

Determined to find a way to get out of the house, Langdon decided to place a call to the North Carolina Botanical Garden to volunteer her services. "I live in an apartment and grow tomatoes on my balcony—that was the extent of my gardening background. And I didn't even know if they took volunteers," she says. Not only did the place need all the help it could get, it was also home to a horticultural therapy program.

"I started in the winter," says Langdon. "Nothing was in bloom. But the woman who leads the group would tell us that something was going to be a certain color, and I found myself anticipating that. I started to care about the plants. I was getting out in nature, meeting people, people who were coping. All my suicidal thoughts went away. Every waking moment I'd thought about suicide. But now I was out around blooming life,

green life. It invigorated me. It made me focus on life."

Langdon's doctors are thrilled with the progress she's made in a year. "When you're disabled, you feel pretty worthless," says Langdon. "Here you're a productive member of society. I had come from a field dominated by men, hard-core and intense, with very little understanding of my illness and very little sympathy or compassion. But plant people are the best."

8 What the Teacher Learned

IN THE MOVIE *MR. HOLLAND'S OPUS*, the character played by Richard Dreyfuss reluctantly takes a job as a music teacher to support his family, and even more reluctantly keeps deferring his own career in music for 30 years. Only when school budget cuts force his retirement does he realize that teaching has been his lifesaver—the paths of the students he profoundly affected became the real symphony he had always hoped to compose.

Like Mr. Holland, Marlena Malas began teaching voice 28 years ago without

enthusiasm. She'd been singing since she was 5, a motherless child who hung out at the bar and grill her father owned on the Lower East Side of New York City. At 17 she won a scholarship to a music school and rather easily embarked on a career as a mezzo-soprano. Along the way, she met and married the bass baritone Spiro Malas; their friends were the glitterati of opera—Joan Sutherland, Marilyn Horne, Luciano Pavarotti. Well launched on a similar career, Malas was literally disabled by performance anxiety. "As the career got more important, I got terrified," she recalls. "Cold hands, sweating, no sleep. Emotionally, I just don't think I had the stability for it."

Early in her studies, a teacher told her that she would be good at teaching. "It pissed me off," she says. "Someone going for a musical career does not want to hear that she should be sitting behind a piano teaching. Was he telling me that I wasn't going to be a singer? Why didn't he see what I wanted him to see?"

The idea of teaching was no more agreeable in the wake of what she calls her vocal crisis. "I was very angry and bitter when I started teaching. Singing was what I wanted to do, and I couldn't do it anymore. I'm a competitive person—it was hard to see close friends going ahead. But when I was in crisis, I went from teacher to teacher asking questions about things like breathing and placement. I gathered so much information. And when I started teaching, I was meeting all these wonderful singers—I kind of think they developed my ear. I never thought teaching would be a new career. I did it because I had to heal and because I had to do something with the energy and information I had."

Now an eminent and beloved member of the voice faculty at Juilliard, Malas recognizes that making the transition from singing to the teaching of singing was lifesaving, a way to keep music in her life and to give it to others. "I learn every single day," she says, reveling in the names of those who have passed through her life and made their debuts at the Met. "For years I taught a wonderful mezzo-soprano who was singing the roles I would have sung. I did not have one moment of desire or jealousy. I know that this is what I was meant to be doing." ●

