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Kaitlin Quistgaard

The Common Ground Interview

BY ROB SIDON



Kaitlin Quistgaard is editor-in-chief of *Yoga Journal*. With approximately 17 million Americans practicing yoga, Kaitlin is one of the most influential celebrities in the field. An unassuming yogini herself, she is a regular attendee at the *Yoga Journal* Conferences. We caught up with her between her home in Sebastopol and the magazine's San Francisco headquarters. ➔

In Wild Thing pose, in a class taught by Anusara Yoga founder John Friend, at a yoga festival.



Common Ground: When seeing you I sometimes joke “The Devil Wears Lululemon.” It’s my way of paying homage to the influence you have in the yoga world.

Kaitlin Quistgaard: Well, I would never want a reader to feel that *Yoga Journal* was suggesting a prescription for how they should practice. My aim is to use whatever influence I have to encourage people to practice yoga and to listen to themselves. I want to show them new possibilities—ways of thinking, moving, or being—that might really benefit them.

You’re modest by nature, thankfully. But you are in a position to make (or break) yoga teachers’ careers, as well as to influence trends.

It’s not modesty. I honestly see my role as one of service to the yoga community. I make decisions about the stories we run in the magazine by thinking about the readers: What would best serve people who are looking for inspiration to get on the mat or meditation cushion? When I think about teachers we might feature, I’m thinking, “Who is offering something unique and valuable that could benefit the larger community?” Along with all the other editors at *Yoga Journal*, I take classes with lots of different teachers from different traditions, and when I find myself really inspired or transformed—when a teacher offers something profound or innovative or useful—I feel compelled to figure out how to represent it in the magazine so that as many people as possible might benefit from it.

There are thousands of yoga teachers, but only a handful of “master teachers”; what traits distinguish the latter?

Depth of study and integrity. Master teachers have typically received the teachings from another master, and then lived those teachings for many years. The great teachers I know have really explored the nuances of the teachings and experienced their own transformation—and they’ve also confronted the hard edges of doubt or seeming impossibility. The thing that is so compelling about a master is the integra-

tion of their personal experiences with their understanding of traditional practice. When you ask them a question, they have an answer that demonstrates that they not only know what the text says or what their teacher said about the topic, but that they have their own intimate experience with it.

What is your personal background with hatha yoga?

My mom was an early adopter. She seemed to spend a lot of time in Headstand when I was growing up. I think I did my first practice alone, using one of her books, when I was about 14 and started occasionally going to class with her soon after that. By the time I was in college, I was fairly interested, but I really started dedicating myself to regular practice when I was in my late 20s, working as a journalist in Buenos Aires. There’s been a pretty strong yoga community in Argentina for a long time.

And with regard to the other, more esoteric yoga disciplines—the philosophical, the meditative, the devotional?

Back to my mom. She was a devotee of Swami Muktananda, an Indian guru who came to the States in the late ’70s—so I got a full-on introduction to meditation, chanting, and yoga philosophy when I was 16 or 17. It was hard on me, actually—ashram life wasn’t anything I was going to brag about at my college prep high school. And I never felt personally called to be a devotee of any guru. So I outwardly rejected a lot of it while secretly loving the chant-

ing and the sense of community. It wasn’t until decades later that I felt I could really integrate the different aspects of my upbringing.

It’s my opinion that hatha yoga is a great gateway for unsuspecting seekers to get on the path.

I think a lot of people agree with you. But I question what you mean by “get on the path.” To where, exactly? Enlightenment? I think yoga postures do make you feel good physically, and that makes you feel uplifted mentally. And I know from experience that a well-sequenced practice can really quiet the mind in preparation for meditation. If you experience bliss in your body and peace of mind, chances are good that you’ll want more. So you might commit to more practice and maybe to exploring yoga philosophy—especially if the classes you take include some of the philosophical teachings. But I’m wary of the idea that Down Dog is a gateway to enlightenment. Yoga can shift your relationship to your body and mind, but I don’t think it’s got some mystical, alchemical power to change who you are or what you’re committed to. At its best, it opens your eyes and gives you the clarity to see the possibilities before you, so that you can make conscious choices about the path you want to take.

Do you care to elaborate on the trend of music (often live devotional music) infiltrating into the asana practice?

I’m a music lover, and I really enjoy classes with live music. One of the best experiences

I've ever had on the mat was at a class led by Nicki Doane and Eddie Modestini, with Michael Franti playing acoustic and singing "Sometimes I feel like I can do anything" as we were all pushing into our fifth backbend. Music can add a lot of energy to a class—and I love it! But I usually practice in silence so that I can listen to my breath and quiet my mind. I think the practice can accommodate both music and silence—the choice really has more to do with your intention for your practice on any specific day and which would serve it best.

And the trend of service, such as with Off the Mat and Into the World?

I'm really excited by the yoga community's embrace of service projects—a lot of people really do seem to recognize that we are one, that all of humanity is interrelated, and that it's essential that we act in altruistic rather than selfish ways so that everyone has a better chance at health and happiness. Off the Mat is incredible in its ability to inspire so many people and raise so much money—a half million dollars a year—through grassroots fundraising in the yoga community. And there are lots of smaller projects too. I'm really impressed by the number of yoga students who see a need in the world and then devote themselves to filling it. I think it's fair to say that yoga has helped a lot of people really connect with their hearts and what is most important to them—and given them a sense of empowerment that enables them to go out and change the world.

Where did you go to school, and did you aspire to becoming a magazine editor when you grew up?

I went to Berkeley for a year, then transferred to Barnard, which is the women's college at Columbia University—I wanted to live in New York City. I studied literature and creative writing and was fascinated by history and art history, but I didn't have any kind of career plan. After college, I traveled around Europe, the Middle East, and South America, and I eventually landed a job at a newspaper in Ar-

gentina. I had taken some journalism classes at Berkeley, but I learned to be a reporter and eventually an editor just by doing it. After four years in Argentina, working as a reporter for *Time* magazine and *The Sunday Times* of London, I came back to San Francisco and got a job at *Wired*. And a few years later, I came to *Yoga Journal*. That was in 2003.

Sounds like you found "right living."

I am really fortunate to have spent a lot of my working life learning about a practice that I've found to be incredibly valuable, and to have the opportunity to share what I learn with others.

You live in the Bay Area, truly a mecca for yoga, yet you edit the magazine for Middle America too.

Well, we have writers all over the country who contribute stories. And we travel a fair amount—I visit studios everywhere I go. Plus, I meet people from all over the world at *Yoga Journal* conferences. Honestly, I feel a pretty seamless sense of community. There are differences, of course, but there are curious and impassioned yoga students everywhere—those are our readers. I think it's perfect for *Yoga Journal* to be based in San Francisco, where we are exposed to so much. Los Angeles and New York obviously have super-vibrant yoga scenes as well, and we get a lot of ideas from those cities too.

What adjustments do you make for the international editions?

The editors at all of the international editions—Japan, Russia, Australia, Brazil, Germany, Italy, Spain, and Thailand—all use a good deal of the content we generate here, but they also create a lot of their own. Usually, about half of any international edition is material that's been translated from the U.S. edition. But the local editors make their own decisions about what they want to publish. What's really exciting is to see the local stories they create, what's happening in their countries. Together, the international issues paint a vivid picture of the global yoga community.



Tree Pose with the Cat in the Hat, at the White House Easter Egg Roll in 2010, where the First Family hosted yoga on the White House lawn.

Oh, but let's gloat a bit about the Bay Area. How do you distinguish this yoga culture?

I think we have just about everything here—AcroYoga, Sanskrit workshops, world class philosophers, meditation retreats, donation-only classes with live music in gorgeous Grace Cathedral! I could go on and on. A lot of businesses in our area offer yoga to their staffs too—from small law firms downtown to Google, local companies see the benefits of the practice and encourage it. And we have an incredible teacher population—so many of our local instructors travel the world leading workshops and retreats, and we can just slide in and take their 6 p.m. class on any old Tuesday. Add in the beauty of our surroundings and the opportunities to practice outdoors, and it's easy to think of this as yoga heaven. We are lucky! 🌿