

Our Dearest Stephani Lindsey: (Part of) a Story

So, I'm trying to think of a clever way to begin this. I'm trying to think of the right combination of words, or a quotation from a great mind that will, like magic, capture the hearts of so many, and wrap them up in one gorgeous and grammatical gift. But, I don't think there's any easy way to talk about Stephani leaving; I think maybe the closest we can get is to talk about how bright it's been having her.

When people talk about her, many mention her light. Studio member Harmony Hall says: "She has been and still is a source of light in my life. Her goodness simply shines." Many students mention her sense of humor, her light-heartedness, the laughter they've shared with her over the years. Dave Wagner tells of the time Stephani showed up to sub a morning class with her pants on inside out, and didn't realize it until halfway through. Lane Taylor mentions the time he tried to "lightly float forward" on his hands, almost crashed into the wall, and Stephani cracked up, mid-instruction. Rob Hastings talks about how Stephani has taught him to laugh at himself, and just let go. But interestingly, and oppositely, many people also mention this other part of her that is... less light. You might call it her fire: the powerful core inside her that is both what drives her as a human being, and also, challenges us, as her students. Alvaro speaks to it this way: "She works to bring light to dark... It's almost like there's an unwillingness to accept darkness, for Stephani. If she's confronted with it, she'll make an effort to bring light there." He goes on to say that she although she works hard to bring about this light, at the same time, it comes to her fairly naturally. "Most people have a dark side," he says. "I don't think she really does."

This statement resonates with what other students say. The refusal of darkness seems applicable, both physically and spiritually. It's easy enough to imagine that when the doctors gave her the grim diagnoses after her car accident over a decade ago, they were speaking of possibilities and impossibilities, *as usual*. They were speaking of patients in her circumstance, *on average*. But she is neither usual nor average. She fought vehemently, demanding to return to light, to the extent to where she stands today (and hand stands, and scorpions, and lunges, and backbends, and arm-balances) is a place of impossibility, which she made possible. This fight in her is not only something she exhibits, but teaches. It's not only within herself that she refuses this darkness.

Studio member Ann Walka tells her story:

“I came back to yoga several years ago at 62, and last winter I thought that arthritis and nerve tangles were going to make me give it up. Stephani’s compassionate and exacting eye, coupled with her light-hearted encouragement, has brought me around. Now I’m imagining that with her guidance toward proper alignment, and a few props she’s suggested, I might go on for years. And thanks to Stephani, I stand straighter and open my heart wider in and out of the studio.”

Stephani’s ability to empower her students comes from her humility as much as her strength; her willingness to teach from a place that is more than deep, and less than always pretty. Rob Hastings speaks of the rich effect this has had on him:

“I think one of Steph’s greatest qualities, aside from those powerful biceps, is that she brings her life to the studio and appears to teach from that, to use her own ‘issues’ as a stepping off place to help her students become better yogis, to help us with the difficulty of a pose by showing us how that difficulty is the same whether we are dealing with personal matters or trying to get into a more balanced Hanuman. I have always felt that she teaches from that place that is her humanity, that place that knows what it’s like to suffer and to let yourself down with disappointment, but to not allow that disappointment to dictate our lives to us.”

Many of Stephani’s students talk about how much they’ve watched her grow and bloom, over the years. There’s a touch of irony in this, I think: the students speaking proudly of their teacher’s growth. And yet, students mirror their teacher. They seek to mimic and repeat. As a student, you can feel the practice your teacher puts in. You can sense the effort and belief they put toward their practice, and therefore, you.

Alvaro says this about being a teacher:

“A lesson taught is a lesson learned. So whatever you’re teaching, you’re learning it. In the 20 people in the room, you’re seeing what you’re teaching.”

Lane Taylor speaks of Stephani’s growth this way:

“(Her) growth as an instructor has been remarkable and wonderful for those of us in her classes. I have come to much appreciate the clarity of

her instruction, her sense of humor, the joy she brings to her work, and the creativity and novelty of the routines and asanas she has challenged me with. Evident as well is Stephanie's spiritual growth, from which she suggests ways of thinking about our own practice of yoga and about our individual and collective challenges in life."

This balance in Stephani, which her students cherish, is something that makes her classes inviting yet challenging, gentle but fierce. Especially to a beginning yoga student, what's referred to as the "spiritual" side of yoga can seem strange and separate from "real life." But Stephani's lightness and warmth makes this spiritual side seem not only applicable, but attainable. In this, too, her students have seen her grow.

Triathlete Casey Machula says this:

"The spiritual aspect of the practice was the most salient aspect of Stephani's classes. At the same time, she pushed my physical boundaries in a loving and joyful way. This was definitely the next level I was looking for. I totally resonated with Stephanie's style, since she's fiery, but not without that inner core of sweetness and acceptance."

Yvonne Grogan also spoke of the growth she's seen within her teacher:

"It has been such a joy to watch Stephani's growth and development over these past years: in her physical yoga practice, in her spiritual expansion, and in the blooming of tattoos across her beautiful body!!! She has always been a dynamic example of ecstatic life force and her energy always lifts and inspires me."

It's touching that so many speak of the phenomenal growth they've watched in Stephani, as a teacher. Yet this growth in her extends past where most of us even know: past her teaching, to her studentship, and before. Erin tells the story of when she first met Steph.

"In 2001, I taught a semester-long yoga class at NAU. A sweet, young, untattooed Stephani Lindsey was in this class, and would occasionally leave during the middle. I didn't think much of it. One day, however, I finally realized that she had left to go and sit in the hall right outside the door, and cry. I pulled together all my confidence as a teacher, and approached her after class. We had an intense discussion about her relatively recent accident, the pain she was having, and the holding of emotions in our bodies. It was a conversation I remember coming away from thinking: this young woman will either never come to yoga again, or

she will make it her life.”

If there's anything I'm sure of, about writing this story, it's that we could go endlessly on, speaking of the blossoms brought about by, and within, Stephani. That is of course what makes her departure to Tucson sad for us. But also, it's what makes it so exciting and so fitting. It's difficult not to imagine and appreciate all the new light Tucson is about to receive. It's difficult not to be excited for all of those new faces that she'll make smile; all of those new, bare feet that will stand in her presence; all of the new hands that will reach to shake hers, that will reach to grow straighter in a pose, that will come together, in front of their hearts, by her leading.

And now, another confession: It may be as hard to conclude this story as it was to begin it. I think all I have left to say is this: we get to keep the fruit. The blossoms. Don't forget that. As much as it's true that a teacher sees herself in her students, so in our teachers, we see ourselves, and what we're striving to become. Stephani has grown; we have grown, too. She has blossomed, but we have as well, and some of those blossoms are both hers and ours, together: an intricate combination of instruction and reception, leadership and following, voice and body, heart and lunging right legs, the power to stand on your head, and the power to simply stand.

And these blossoms — proof of all our growing — are within us, and we get to keep them. Nothing is lost. Although each of our journeys is different, there's a chance that this next step is one of growing, not only for Stephani, but for us as well. Even the new growth of the upcoming season will be, somehow, shared. Close your eyes, steady your breath, and you may even be able to hear it: petals opening, one by one, somewhere, in this very moment.

There are only two mistakes one can make along the road to truth; not going all the way, and not starting. —Buddha