

Interview by Sarah Lopes

Yoga and Meditation Teacher, Herbalist, Independent Film Producer with a B.A. in Theology and an M.S. in Health Psychology. Storytelling is food for the soul!



Gail Mann: Yoga Helps Us Live Fuller Lives

Veteran yoga teacher reflects on how the ancient mind-body arts have shaped the evolution of her personal practice and professional career.

In developing leadership programs for entrepreneurs and executives, Gail Mann draws upon over thirty years of experience in the business world and her studies at the Simmons School of Management.

Gail's dedication to leadership and management was the driving force in her career and has become the core principle of her yoga school, YogaUnbound. Combining leadership and management principles with yoga and meditation techniques, YogaUnbound brings mindfulness training to leaders and executives for enhanced decision-making, productivity and stress reduction.

I spoke to Gail to learn more about her personal yoga journey, how she transitioned into teaching yoga as a career and her plans for the future.



How did you discover yoga?

I was studying developmental psychology in 1970 at the Antioch-Putney Graduate School [now Antioch University New England] in Putney, Vermont. A yoga group was formed to meet on Sunday mornings to study with a Swami who was living on a commune in the area. It was an amazing experience! It feels ironic that I now live some thirty miles from Putney.

While yoga at the commune was an enjoyable experience, I feel my first official yoga class came many years later at a yoga workshop with Judith Lasater. I got hooked on going deep into my body

to find just the slightest movement to adjust how I was feeling in each pose. I can still feel the quiet and the meditation of Judith's restorative poses and ultimate peace of being "propped" and supported in Supta Baddha Konasana [Reclining Bound Angle Pose].

How did your practice develop in the early days?

Judith had two wonderful proteges in the Boston area with whom I took classes as well as attending Patricia Walden's classes at an old church in Cambridge. Back then, many classes were held in churches and in the homes of the pioneers of yoga.

I thrived in building my yoga practice with the alignment principles of Iyengar Yoga and soon found my way to Ashtanga Vinyasa Yoga with an Iyengar-trained teacher. I loved the physical demands of Ashtanga — guess that says something about my personality. I was a workplace warrior (high tech marketer) at the time and relied on Ashtanga and running to keep me sane and balanced.

I decided it was time to do a yoga retreat and took off to Costa Rica. I had no idea who the teacher was, but like the sound of Vinyasa Yoga so off I went. Of course, this was back in the late 90's when yoga retreats were slowly evolving to what we know today. There I was with Cyndi Lee and had the great experience of spending lots of one-on-one time with her.

Cyndi was the one who convinced me to take a yoga teacher training course. I then went to New York City that summer to commence my initial training.

What motivated you to continue?

Vinyasa captured my soul. I love to move! I had been a modern dancer earlier in my life. Vinyasa enabled me to create interesting sequences all while moving to music. I would dream about new sequences and could not wait to try them out either alone or with my small group of students. By then I was teaching on weekends and evenings at my home studio. Eventually, I branched out to the local church and eventually to a great old mill building.



I managed to move into consulting to have a more flexible schedule but still had lots of work demands to balance with teaching. My first studio was located in Lawrence, Massachusetts — an immigrant community filled with lively Hispanic women who regularly attended classes. I felt lucky to have a Spanish woman who was a yogi! She was on a teaching internship in the Lawrence schools and helped enormously with students who were still learning English. Of course what we found is that yoga and Sanskrit words for poses provide a truly universal language.

By now I was immersed in Shiva Rea workshops, Anusara immersions with Desiree Rumbaugh, Betsey Downing, and Todd Norian. I even went through a Baptiste Power Yoga period. Every style has so much to offer.

Boston was beginning to open up with new studios. When I arrived at Exhale to find Shiva Rea teaching a class, I could see that the tide had turned to the yoga we know today. By then it was time to advance my training to over 500 hours. I was fortunate enough to have a plethora of great teachers to guide me on my yoga journey and turned to Barbara Benagh for the next stage of my practice. Barbara drilled the importance of alignment into my practice for the well-being of my aging body as well as providing a profound experience of philosophy and anatomy to add to my knowledge.



What made you decide to become a teacher?

While I kept my corporate job to support my yoga training and development, I gradually became more committed to my practice. Many of my friends noticed this driving force in my life and asked me to teach them yoga. I was then living in the suburbs of Boston where there were very few classes. I started teaching in my home studio and organically grew my following.

At that point, my practice had evolved from Iyengar — my original training and a great foundation — to Ashtanga and then to Vinyasa. I had many athletic friends who loved the flow of Vinyasa and wanted more and more classes.

Once I had established the YogaUnbound studio (at the mill building in Lawrence) my commitment to teaching deepened until I was able to leave my corporate job and dedicate more time to teaching yoga. It was not until 2011 that I was able to leave my corporate and consulting work to focus 100 percent on teaching.

Tell us about your Mindfulness for Leadership Program.

The ***Mindfulness for Leadership Program*** evolved from my annual involvement at the Simmons Leadership Conference, which is regarded as the world's premier women's leadership conference.

What I was hearing from the speakers there was in harmony with the basic tenets of yoga — particularly the Chakra system and meditation:

Be attentive and in flow with the changes at hand in the present moment;

Remain calm in the midst of challenge and crisis;
Rise to your best under pressure;
Develop inner awareness to find your intelligent edge; and,
Listen deeply to your heart (and gut!) to speak your voice.



Unlike most mindfulness programs, I incorporate basic yoga asanas to bring a somatic experience to help participants internalize their vision, hopes, and dreams — for both their private and professional lives.

How would you describe your personal practice today?

All too often I feel I do not practice enough. I come from a tradition of ninety minutes to two-hour classes. I had to shift from this mindset and figure out how to compress my practice to under an hour.

I practice more when I decide to work on a couple of peak poses rather than feeling I need to go through a complete preparation for these poses. As all of us yogis eventually learn, I can prepare with fewer sequences and get into the poses I want to work on.

I subscribe to an online service where I connect to the many teachers that I admire and have worked with. I have a lovely home studio where I can tune into a class and feel as though I'm there. Being in Vermont, I no longer have access to the level of teaching that I

had in Boston. It is a challenge not being able to hop in the car and be in a class where I feel directly connected and engaged.



What benefits has yoga brought into your life?

The physical benefits are too many to name. Most of all, though, yoga provides me with a general feeling of well-being — definitely fewer aches and pains than what I hear about from people of my age! Yoga allows me to keep on hiking, skiing, and taking advantage of outdoor adventures.

Meditation and practices like Yoga Nidra are my lifelines when I find myself feeling a bit “blue” or have trouble sleeping. Depression has always been part of my psyche and yoga has helped me manage my sense of self.

What benefits have you seen in your students?

All of what I expressed about myself I definitely see in students who are dedicated to their practice. I hear from male students how yoga helps their physical activities with more focus and balance. From women, they feel more vitality and strength.

Yoga is a relief from overdoing — whether they’re gardening, horseback riding, golfing, etc. Vermont women (and men) pride themselves on their physical abilities, and luckily they have found yoga to keep their bodies strong and healthy.

I might also add that with the political and social upheaval we are all feeling here in the United States, I find more students emphasizing the need for yoga and meditation to let go of the angst and often fear they feel about their future. More than ever, we need to focus on the present, find stillness within and know that we have the inner strength to weather whatever happens next.

What are your plans for the future?

To retire!! Yes, I'm hoping to hand over the yoga studio I built over the last year so that I can teach more and manage less.

I've gotten hooked on Kundalini and will pursue training and workshops — perhaps even one in Greece this summer. I would also love to host a yoga-hiking retreat in the Dolomites in Italy.

Yoga provides a wonderful venue for exploring life and all that it has to offer.



To learn more about Gail Mann, her teaching schedule, and various programs, visit YogaUnbound.com