

# DECONSTRUCTING DEBORAH

*Just finding your guru is hard enough  
without actually having to get to know her*

BY EMILY GOULD

**T**he first time I walked into Deborah Wolk's Iyengar yoga class, I was a complete mess. I'd just started a new job, and I was working all the time, even when there was nothing left to work on. Which might explain why my friend Lori kept trying to drag me to her yoga class. And which might also explain why I'd been putting up a fight. I didn't want to slow down and check in with myself, to have to think about why I was feeling so terrible at every waking moment. And I didn't want anyone else to pay attention to me, either, lest they notice any of the enormous number of ways in which I was fake and lame and inadequate. I just wanted to disappear.

Deborah singled me out right away. "Emily has scoliosis," she announced barely five minutes into the class. "Everyone, come over here and look at Emily's curve."

The class crowded around me and ogled my back as I stayed put in a forward bend. Deborah, who from this angle seemed to be entirely composed of sinewy muscles and wild, dark curls, put her hand on my lower back and told me to breathe into her hand. She spoke in a soothing tone that made everything sound woo-woo and ridiculous, but I gave in and let the seldom-used muscles there respond to the heat of her palm. For a moment, I felt a kind of relaxation no pill had ever provided.

Three years later, I'm still breathing into Deborah's hand twice a week. I'm less of a human train wreck than I was back then, but I'm not so sure that would be the case without Deborah's supervision. And when my mom, a convert whose religious enthusiasm continually perplexes my mostly secular Jewish family, started nagging me to become a part of a "spiritual community," I found myself giving her an answer that I hadn't even considered until I heard myself say it: I had already found a spiritual community in Deborah's yoga class.

Why, my mother wanted to know, had I chosen to "belong" to this community rather than a more traditional one, like the temple she attended, the one where I'd been enrolled in Hebrew school from the third grade on? Well, as loosely structured and open-minded as that

Reform Jewish community had been, I'd never really felt a part of it. Though we paid lip service to progressive ideals and were rewarded for questioning our religious teachers' authority, we still mouthed ancient words thanking a "Lord" some of us didn't believe in. We still had to sit still and not ask questions while the rabbi told us about how we had to support our heroic brethren in Israel, even when we weren't sure that what they were doing was right or good. I didn't always feel at home.

Deborah's class had no such dogma. There was no chanting or praying, no mention of God. There was just simple encouragement of openness and compassion toward one's fellow human beings. Instead of feeling linked to the people in my Hebrew school classes because of a shared heritage, I felt connected to the people in my yoga classes because of a shared decision to be there.

And the people I've met in Deborah's class, whom I definitely wouldn't have crossed paths with elsewhere, became almost as important a part of my life as Deborah herself. They're men and women, old and young, rich and poor, American and not. We'd go out for dinner after class and compare stories from our disparate lives. Having all just taken the same class gave us something to talk about, whether it was the emotional rush we got from a series of hip-opening poses or the dude in the back row who had yet to discover deodorant. And when we'd show up for the next class, Deborah treated us all equally. I never questioned whether or not I belonged the way I had in temple. I just knew.

My devotion to Deborah's world was also funneled by my reverence for Deborah herself. My childhood rabbi regularly made bids for street cred by wearing a funky-colored tallith and yarmulke set. Deborah, on the other hand, is deeply, intimidatingly cool. At forty-six, she dresses very much like a punkish teenager, and she is covered from head to toe in tattoos (her latest addition: a large pink unicorn on her right forearm). Instead of opening class with supposedly profound platitudes, she begins with chitchat about the book she's reading or the challenges involved in finding a sailor on Craigslist who will tie knots on her new studio's rope wall. There are plenty of yoga instructors with far more in-your-face

spiritual styles, but their wordy explanations, like my rabbi's rambling sermons, have always turned me off. Deborah's method of teaching is never explicitly verbal; she dispenses with words and puts the yogic principles of helping and loving others to use.

After I'd been going to classes with Deborah for a while, I found myself wanting to know more about her. Occasionally during class she would allude to parts of her history that had nothing to do with yoga class: she'd refer to her past life in the East Village scene, working on performance art and partying with 1980s art stars. I wanted to ask what else wasn't she wasn't telling us, but I couldn't. I needed Deborah to remain strictly relegated to her teacher role so that I could continue to cherish her pearls of wisdom as if they were handed down from some mystical higher authority. Over time, this boundary started getting more difficult to maintain. One day, I showed up at my friend Tania's house for a barbecue only to find Deborah sprawled in a plastic chair, laughing and drinking a beer, *just like a regular person*. Deborah went to parties? Deborah was allowed to drink beer? I made up an excuse about why I had to leave early.

The next time I saw Tania, I found myself quizzing her about Deborah. Had she *really* worked at the Strand bookstore with Mary Gaitskill? Had she *actually* picked a fight with Courtney Love? Where did she live? What did she eat for breakfast? "Why don't you just ask her?" Tania said.

But it took almost six months before I finally worked up the courage to invite her to dinner after class, a request she seemed to take in stride. She told me she didn't have a private lesson that night and suggested her favorite Japanese restaurant. While we waited for our table, I was nervous, but Deborah was chatting happily about an exciting new venture: a yoga studio specializing in back care and scoliosis that she would soon open with her teacher, Alison West. When we were seated, I started quizzing her about her life story. She turned shy, but her laser-beam eye contact never faltered. I'd always found that level of focus reassuring when it was trained on my handstand, but now, outside of the studio, it was completely intimidating. Was she scrutinizing

my posture while I sat across the table from her? Or was her mind on higher things?

But as Deborah opened up about her life, my fearful feelings began to fade. I learned about her childhood issues with her conservative parents and her move to Harlem after graduating from Sarah Lawrence. She'd had a shaved head and a bad roommate, and eventually ended up downtown. At the time, she was working at the Strand and thought that she wanted to be a writer, but she started drawing, sketching, and cartooning, and then got more into dancing and doing performance art. It was all there, the cool life I would have wanted to live if I'd moved to the East Village in 1981 instead of 2001. I told her how envious I was, and she just chuckled.

I don't know what I'd expected — a story of a dissolute youth followed by an inspiring tale of yogic redemption, probably — but that's not what I ended up getting. In fact, during that dinner, as Deborah discussed the last twenty years of her life, she didn't mention yoga at all.

Once it became clear that we weren't going to be talking about the difficulty of achieving full balance in half moon pose, I had to ask about the significance of all of Deborah's tattoos. She told me that she'd started getting them in Sydney, when she was living with a junkie couple who'd gone there to straighten out (heroin was the one drug Deborah told me she had not dabbled in).

For her first tattoo, the multicolored pinwheel on her arm, she went to a burly biker type. As Deborah described the meathead berating her while he worked — "What kind of girl gets a tattoo like that? What kind of a girl are you?" — I flinched. I couldn't believe that Deborah would let anyone treat her like that. This was a woman who could silence a chattering room with a flick of her eyebrow. And then I was reminded of the time in class when an older student suddenly fainted, falling to the floor with a terrifying clunk. Another student who works as a nurse had calmly taken charge of the situation while Deborah panicked. I'd written that incident off as a fluke, but now I wondered whether Deborah's badass persona had evolved to conceal the fact that she was, in fact, more fearful than she let on.

The next week, class was different. Not worse, exactly, but I found that I wasn't as able to ascribe

Deborah's insights to some almost otherworldly ability. And maybe it was just because I was scrutinizing Deborah with more skepticism, but I found myself sensing her hurry toward the end of the class, as if she couldn't wait to be done with us. For the first time, I found myself thinking of myself in Deborah's shoes (or bare feet, as it were): at the end of a long workday, ready for sleep and bed and no more demands from other people.

The following week, Deborah and I had dinner again, this time with Tania. My mood was much less fraught than at our last dinner, and I found myself asking questions of a different kind. I wanted to know what had finally brought Deborah to yoga after her years of searching the world and the Lower East Side for fun and purpose. It turned out that Deborah's transformation into a yoga teacher had been recent: at around the time I was moving to the city, Deborah was completing her teacher training. She hadn't originally been motivated to become a serious yogi out of a sense of spiritual responsibility. The thing that had spurred her was actually a case of scoliosis. She'd been trying to find a solution to the back pain that was worsening with age.

I finally broached the subject of religion and found out that Deborah was also raised in a Jewish household. When asked about her relationship to her parents' religion, she said, "I don't like the role that Judaism relegates women to." Her characteristic openness clouded over for a second, but I persisted, asking her if she believed in God. "Nope, no God," she said matter-of-factly. "Just people." Deborah hesitated before adding that her yoga practice has brought her closer to what's divine in people.

I thought of the times in her class when I'd felt that closeness, when there was something positively beatific about everybody in the room with me, and of other times when I'd been more concerned with how hungry or tired I was, composing e-mails in my head as I balanced in tree pose. Now that I knew Deborah as a person, I realized that she was probably similarly divided. But then I thought of the time during a private lesson when she looked straight into my eyes and told me that keeping my limbs strong and purposeful in my standing poses would combat my depression

— a condition I hadn't even mentioned I suffered from. Maybe she had been able to see something that was hidden in me, although it was equally possible that I had felt comfortable enough with her to stop pretending to be OK.

After dinner, Deborah unlocked her bike at the curb and we did a little "should we hug" dance before, yes, hugging. As Tania and I walked toward the subway, Deborah raced ahead of us, dodging cars and bumping over potholes. I stared after her, still wondering about what went on in her head. And then I decided to stop worrying so much about it and concentrate on what was going on in mine. So what if Deborah wasn't the source of all the wisdom and balance I derived from her classes? She was the one who helped me get there. &

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