By Brahmi Gold-Bernstein

This was my fifth SYTAR, and I think it was the best yet. The hotel was just fifteen minutes from the airport, thirty minutes from downtown Washington, D.C., and situated in a lovely area, Reston Town Center, with lots of reasonably priced restaurants and a variety of shops right outside the door. On Saturday evening, there was a free outdoor concert and, on Sunday, a yoga festival. Inside the hotel, all the sessions and vendor booths were located in a circle on the same floor. It was all easy and convenient.

Although we have a report by Susi Hately on the Meeting of Schools (MOS), which started Wednesday night, as a school director I would not consider missing such an event, and I want to say a few words about it. I've served on the planning committee for the past two years and found it to be a wonderful experience in which I was able to work with a great group of people striving to provide service and value to IAYT member schools. This year, the MOS presented panel discussions on assessing students and distance learning. If you're a member school, please send a request to join the private Facebook group “IAYT's Member Schools” and enter into the online sangha. You'll find some of the MOS presentations posted there, as well as discussions of issues important to yoga therapy schools, including proposed changes to the accreditation standards, distance learning, and legislative issues surrounding yoga therapy.

The SYTAR started Thursday afternoon with five Common Interest Community (CIC) sessions focused on rehab professions, mental healthcare, cancer care, yoga therapy careers, and the military. In previous years, the CIC sessions were like TED talks, with speakers and audiences. However, this year the format was changed to make it more interactive. Each CIC session was split into seven groups, and each of the different presenters visited each group and gave the same short talk. Each speaker had to give their talk and do Q&A in ten minutes. This new format turned out to be quite intense, as you might imagine, but it also opened up more discussion and networking possibilities that were fruitful for attendees and presenters alike. A standout for me was Anne Pitman's 5-minute practice for releasing embodied shock after hearing a cancer diagnosis (or for any other shock). I think it should be part of every yoga therapist's tool kit.

The keynote and plenary sessions throughout the conference were excellent. Michael Lee, MA, E-RYT 500, founder and dean of Phoenix Rising Yoga Therapy, opened the conference on Thursday evening with a 30-year perspective in his keynote presentation, "The Evolution and Future of Yoga Therapy," with some fun photos and music. He said yoga therapy, as a profession, is at the "edge of achieving respectability and acceptance" as a complementary health practice and that this is the result of searching for how to effect meaningful and lasting change. He said that over the years we have adapted and evolved to become mainstream while holding firm to our values and noted that in 2004 there were 750 IAYT members, in 2010 there were 2,065 members, and now in 2016 there are over 4,000 members.

On Friday morning, Josephine Briggs, MD, director of the National Center for Complementary and Integrative Health, spoke in her keynote about research on yoga therapy. Her talk focused on areas where mainstream medicine does not work well and yoga therapy does, including muscular skeletal pain, depression, and stress. She pointed to the opioid addiction crisis and the need for nonpharmaceutical approaches to pain control. Briggs commented that for yoga therapy to become more widely accepted there needs to be more and better research. She pointed to the challenges of effectively measuring yoga as a complementary modality due to the wide range of practices. Her enthusiasm for the benefits yoga...
has to offer within healthcare and her determination to find the research to support it left me feeling very positive about the eventual acceptance of yoga therapy in healthcare.

Next were two plenary speakers. David Fogel, MD, cofounder and CEO of Casey Health Institute (CIH) in Gaithersburg, Maryland. Dr. Fogel was offered a building, funding, and an opportunity to redefine how to deliver healthcare—it was an opportunity he couldn’t turn down. CIH is a freestanding, nonprofit, model healthcare center that offers integrative primary care along with many other modalities. They accept commercial insurance, Medicaid, and Medicare, and offer financial assistance for all complementary modalities. Dr. Fogel presented a vision of what a healthcare practice focused on health instead of disease looks like. In addition to the usual medical staff, the integrative medical team includes a full-time, salaried yoga therapist, a chiropractor, two acupuncturists, two physiologists, a naturopath, a nutritionist, and a massage therapist who also does Reiki. CIH clientele includes “the Whole Foods crowd” as well as many who have never heard of integrative medicine. It was inspiring to hear how yoga therapy can work as a key feature of an integrative healthcare model.

Judith Broida, PhD, from Johns Hopkins University, spoke about her experience creating the first master’s program in yoga therapy (based on the IAYT standards for the training of yoga therapists) at Maryland University of Integrative Health. Dr. Broida, a very dynamic and inspiring speaker and a long-time advocate for women in research, views university-based programs as preparing the faculty and advancing the field of yoga therapy and the studio-based programs as preparing the yoga therapy workforce. Broida talked about yoga therapy within the context of the Lewin three-stage model of change that involves unfreezing, change, and refreezing. In the unfreezing stage of yoga therapy, there was little formalization and pioneers led the way, trying new approaches. We are now in the change stage that includes some formalization and professionalism through accreditation, certification, scope of practice, code of ethics, and self-regulation. Broida said that this is the time to think creatively, to “work together to keep moving the field forward,” and to keep expanding the scope and vision before the refreezing occurs and external regulation will likely cause increased formalization and rigidity.

On Saturday morning, keynote speaker Sandra (Amrita) McLanahan, MD, an Integral Yoga practitioner, spoke about how yoga can help with the major causes of disease. She stated that the number one cause of disease is smoking, the second is drinking, the third is the standard American diet, fourth is movement (or lack thereof), and the fifth is stress. Yoga as a lifestyle has a therapeutic role to play in all of these. She stated that the Dean Ornish program Reversing Heart Disease® showed how diet and yoga actually reversed heart disease instead of just freezing or slowing its progression. McLanahan also spoke about the health benefits of a plant-based diet and stated that no similar health benefits can be ascribed to the low-carb or paleo diet fads. She talked about diet for transcendence and spiritual growth. The research presented each year consistently points to diet as one of the most important factors in improving health.

The remainder of the featured speakers have had a long history as IAYT members, board members, and committee members, and their plenary talks went to the heart of yoga therapy. Matthew Taylor, PT, PhD, has given much service to the IAYT, including as past IAYT Advisory Board member, member of the Board of Directors, president of the IAYT, member of the International Journal of Yoga Therapy Editorial Review Board, chair of the business development
community, SYTAR Planning Committee, and SYTAR Rehabilitation CIC director/co-director. Taylor gave a moving talk about stretching the vision of yoga therapy while remaining true to the process and not identifying with outcomes, so as to remain present and co-creative in the practice with the client. If you missed it, I highly recommend you buy the DVD of this session; it is heartwarming and well worth hearing. Leigh Blashki, who has served on the IAYT Standards Committee, Accreditation Committee, Ethics and Disciplinary Review Panel, and the Certification Committee, followed Matthew’s thought-provoking talk and transported us with an experiential practice to the heart of healing.

Experiential and practical yoga therapy practice tips continued in the Sunday morning plenary sessions. Hansa Knox, LMT, E-RYT 500, Accreditation Committee chair and past IAYT Advisory Board member, shared how she uses the different yoga tools within her yoga therapy practice. She reminded us that we are treating the person as a whole, not a disease; every aspect of our body is sharing a message and we must therefore be mindful and present. I thought I recorded her practice of using the Sanskrit alphabet with the ayurvedic marma points only to discover that when you have the sound off on the phone there is also no sound on the video. Maybe I’ll capture it next year.

Amy Weintraub MFA, E-RYT 500, founder of the LifeForce Yoga® Healing Institute, spoke about creating a safe and sacred container for the practice of yoga therapy using ritual, asking for permission, cueing to sensations, grounding, and co-

The other conference sessions included 7:00 a.m. practice sessions that were well worth getting up for. Ann Swanson’s "Therapeutic Yoga Flow for Balance" gave me some excellent ideas to try with my Parkinson’s class. Better yet, now that I know how awesome she is and that she posts YouTube videos, I’ve found a new resource. Another session, Indu Arora’s “Yoga Nidra as Morning Nectar” was indeed just that—a blissful morning practice.

The break-out sessions I attended on Friday and Saturday afternoons were also excellent. I especially enjoyed J. J. Gormley’s talk on the different yoga models that can be used in yoga therapy, including the chakras, koshas, vrittis, kleshas, and antarayas. I got some good tips from John Schumacher’s session on the knees and Rachel Krentzman’s session on yoga therapy for neck, shoulders, and upper back that I will use with my yoga therapy clients. I always leave SYTAR with new techniques and valuable information, a sentiment I heard echoed by others I spoke with.
Although the sessions and talks were excellent, for me some of the most valuable experiences happen between sessions, in making connections with the presenters and other attendees. We at TriYoga first met Rachel Krentzman four years ago at the SYTAR in Boston, and she recently included our TriYoga Total Health Assessment based on the koshas in her newly published book Yoga for a Happy Back: A Teacher’s Guide to Spinal Health through Yoga Therapy. Steffany Moonaz and Jnani Chapman now teach in our training program and have become dear friends. We met several other school directors also in the process of accreditation and found great camaraderie in sharing our experiences.

The other thing I love about the conference is collecting books signed by the authors. It seems there are more and more each year. My suitcase keeps getting heavier and I’m running out of room on my bookshelf: tangible proof of growth in the field!

On the last night there was a wonderful banquet with great vegan and vegetarian food (along with some non-vegetarian food). Awards were given to those serving on the accreditation committee, and three schools received their accreditation certificates: Prana Yoga Institute of Yoga and Holistic Health in Ft. Wayne, Indiana; Yoga Vahini from Chennai, India; and Yoga & Polarity from Malverne, New York. Seventeen schools are still in process. Afterwards, everyone greatly enjoyed the humorous, heartwarming, and well-delivered plenary from Kathryn Templeton, MA, E-RYT 500, on embracing mistakes as a path to healing and freedom from shame.

On Sunday morning, Gary Kraftsow, MA, ERYT-500 closed the conference with his keynote talk on using yoga therapy at the end of life and sharing the practice “Antya Krama: Meditations for the End of Life,” which was terrific. However, it needed an afternoon instead of just an hour at the end of the conference. Maybe next year.

I am looking forward to listening to the recordings of the sessions I was not able to attend and to connecting with old and new friends at next year’s conference.