

Chapter 4

The Calm Within The Chaos of Special Needs Parenting



Jane Kleiman

As a kid, I often pretended I was a witch or a priestess or a queen. I had what I call my first spiritual experience sitting by the river near my home. I was in 8th grade. It was dusk. As I watched the lights move in and out of the trees in the hills across the water, time passed. I must have moved into some kind of meditative state, because once I “came to,” I felt as though I had newly arrived in my own body – every one of my senses heightened. It felt like I had magic powers. Preternatural. It was an incredible feeling!

Though I tried to stay in touch with this part of myself, expectations of life and responsibility sent it to sit on the sidelines, only calling it into the game on rare occasions.

In my 30s, I shifted careers from video production to Massage Therapy. I was making ceramic art, had my own business, had a rich, daily yoga practice, and ample free time to have a full social life. I remember thinking: *This must be what a charmed life feels like* — doing what you love with ease.

That was before all the attempts to get pregnant, the infertility treatments, the tentative positive pregnancy results (*I'm happy to tell you, Ms. Kleiman that you are "mostly" pregnant.*), the difficult birth, the near impossible nursing (when I discovered what “listen to your gut” meant) and the seemingly innocuous pediatrician visit when the doctor suggested some early intervention (*I'm sure he'll catch up.*)

We then received the “Your Special Needs Child” packet in the mail, which led to a 20+ page evaluation of a severely developmentally disabled baby, countless hours of therapy, years on end of sleep deprivation (10 to be precise), glacially slow progress, marital strife (the divorce rate is 75% for couples with a disabled child), career loss, loss of self, loss of joy, and the arrival of my new state of being: hypervigilance. Eventually, we came to know what to expect, and by the time my son was about 7, we had arrived at what seemed like a semi-regular life. We’d finally found a rhythm, and our life was easier than it had been in a long time.

In 2012, when my son was 10, I saw that the Kripalu Center for Yoga and Health was offering their Yoga Teacher Training in New York City in a one-weekend-per-month format over the course of a year. I had loved Kripalu Yoga since my friend Nicki brought me to a class while I was visiting her in upstate NY. I gravitated toward Kripalu teachers whenever found them. When I first went back to a yoga class when

my son was 2 years old, the teacher was a Kripalu teacher. I remember weeping at the end of class, feeling like I'd come home again. I'm still friends with her to this day. It was January. Training started in February. I enrolled.

I would spend the better part of the next year completing my training, one weekend at a time in New York City. It was glorious to spend lunch hour walking around the village where I'd lived for so many years. We began in the dark and gray of February in the Northeast and moved through the gradual awakening of the city to spring. As the city and earth sprang to life, I too was renewing.

The weekend format meant I had the whole next month to learn to integrate yoga into my life as it was now. That meant after-bedtime practice instead of a glass of wine. It meant using my breathing and awareness practices as I moved through my day, and when I was actually *in* my life not just when I was still or on my mat.

Spring turned to summer and the heat increased. I practiced in the pool while my son splashed in his happy place. As the sessions resumed in the magical place that is New York City in the autumn (yes, it's really like it is in the movies), I felt a calmness, a slowing down, a reserve of strength and emerging and power that I hadn't felt in what seemed like forever.

Fall quickly became early December, and it was time to plan for graduation weekend.

The arrangements for my son's care were a production. Skills from my former career kicked in to set up all the plans: the child care, the meal and medication instructions, transportation arrangements, share contact information across the long list of people involved. Do all this elaborate planning, and well, cross your fingers! You'll be fine. Your son will be fine. Oh, and by the way, your husband, the only person you've ever left your son with for more than a day? Yeah, he'll be across the country on a business trip. Turn it over to trust.

As the *Bhagavad Gita* (one of the seminal Hindu texts upon which Yoga is based) teaches: Perform the action and let go of the fruits of your labor.

Honestly, I knew everyone could handle executing the plans, but I was not so confident they could handle my son's behaviors. As he turned 11, he had become increasingly aggressive when stressed or upset. He would drop to the floor, hit, grab clothing, and pull hair. So, the emphasis needed to be on prevention; make sure he's never too hungry, change the subject, promise him something he loves for doing a good job.

And then, there I was, finally, at the Kripalu Center in the Berkshires of Massachusetts for graduation weekend of my 200-hour yoga teacher training.

It was the afternoon of the last full day. The Graduation ceremony would be the next morning. I was so delighted to be here at "The mothership," as our lead teacher called it, where I had come for retreats and renewals so many times.

But there was something that was still stuck. I couldn't quite let go into the experience, and I found myself grasping for the big feeling, the full emotional release that told me something was shifting. I felt annoyed that it was holding me back from connection, from being fully present. I chose to interpret it as natural anticipation and invited myself to let it be. We broke for dinner before our final evening session, and I headed back to my dorm room with joyful exhaustion looking forward to some delicious Kripalu food.

I checked my phone.

My mom had called... Three times.

The message she left was:

"I'm in the car with Mina and Jackson. The police are here. They are going to take Jackson to the hospital. He was pulling Mina's hair and my hair and kicking me. The police won't take him home, so I'm going to follow them. Call me back."

It was the phone call I was dreading. Everything stopped. My first instinct was to pack up and speed home. 3 1/2 hours. At night.

I called her back. My son was already gone. On his way to the hospital in a police car. She was about to follow.

"Call me when you get to the hospital," I told her. "Did you give him a snack? Did you offer him ice cream when he got home?" Did you? Did you! *Did you do all the things?*

My poor mother was traumatized and in pain. That hair pulling hurts like hell, especially when he gets right at the scalp. Multiple times. Her grandson just attacked her. I believe at that point in time, he was still laughing as he did it. So, not only did it hurt; it was also disturbing. All of a sudden, this usually sweet, happy boy was maniacally laughing as he grabbed at her, pulling her hair, and kicking.

"Don't let them give him anything," I told her. Immediately, I thought, *Who can I call?*

With my husband in Las Vegas, there was literally no point in upsetting him because there was less that he could do than me, and he was in the middle of work and needed to stay focused. My son needed a familiar face, besides my mom, who he could refocus on, and who could more easily redirect his attention. All our appropriately jovial friends were still on the way home from work.

So, on a Friday night, I called his teacher. She was absolutely that teacher. The one you remember your whole life, and she knew how to handle his behavior. It felt

embarrassing and desperate and intrusive and presumptuous, but I did it anyway. I needed help. This dear woman, I'll call her Joanne, picked up the phone, and I didn't even ask what she was doing. I just launched into it, and would she go to the hospital and meet them there and make sure they didn't do anything like try to admit him to a psych ward or restrain him or drug him unnecessarily? She and her husband were on their way out to dinner, but without missing a beat, they turned around and headed to the hospital.

And there I sat, alone in my dorm room waiting to hear from someone that he had arrived at the hospital and he was safe and calm.

If I didn't finish the weekend at Kripalu, I would not graduate. I had no idea what accommodations could be made in the case of an emergency, but I very distinctly remember reading that because I knew it could happen. And now, here it was. Happening.

Joanne called me first. He was in a bed chatting them up like nothing had happened. Exhale #1.

I asked Joanne to put the nurse on. "Whatever you do, don't give him anything. He needs to eat. Can you please give him some food?"

My mother must've called me next.

"The nurse brought him a sandwich, and he is inhaling it."

Joanne: "They want to admit him. I will take care of it."

Here is where I'm grateful not only to the people who support our family with fierce conviction, but to my own inner wisdom that had me call just the right person. Joanne was able to advocate for my son that he did not need to be admitted. This was an autism meltdown that was now over, and he needed to get home to his familiar surroundings. She was not taking no for an answer. In fact, she sent my mom, the only one who could have consented to such a thing, home. She and her husband would wait for him to finish his second sandwich and bring him home. When he arrived, the army of people I had called were there to greet him, and I knew he was going to be okay. Exhale #2.

I went back to my final evening session before graduation the next day. I was shaking, hungry, exhausted, and spent.

Frozen and in shock, I was just instinctively putting one foot in front of the other. Propelling myself forward—no expectations, no real attachment to what had just occurred because I HAD to let that shit go.

It was time to leave behind the belief that this life of special needs parenting controlled every part of me, that no one could handle it but me, that my son couldn't

handle it or work through his difficulties with anyone but me. We both needed freedom. We both needed agency. We both needed to learn to trust. I needed to accept help in really big, rich, deep full body, gracious ways. Without holding back, without holding onto the guilt. I needed to deserve that precious help, and let it envelop me like the bear hug that I needed.

We entered the room and were split into groups. In Kripalu yoga, there are three stages. Stage 1: You do yoga. "Will". Placing your body willfully into poses. Alignment, and physical sensation are key. Stage 2: You do yoga/yoga does you. "Will and Surrender". You are still using your will to move your body, but you can begin to sense the movement as energy, the energy as movement. Stage 3: Yoga does you. "Surrender".

Swami Kripalu would meditate for 10 to 12 hours per day, and his body would spontaneously move into different postures and shapes as an expression of that energy.

Meditation in Motion

This was the evening practice. We were to enter the circle that our group had formed, come into meditation and then let the energy move us, as we were witnessed by our yoga community. Our sangha.

You've got to be kidding. I already felt so tender, so raw and vulnerable, unsure if I could even make it through the session. How on earth was I going to be able to do this? But I knew there was no way out except through.

There's really no way to describe the feeling of sinking so deeply into yourself and letting your body move in whatever way it wants, letting out moans, crying, raging while people simply witness you. Normally, it would have been hard to let go of self-consciousness, but perhaps the incident at home forced me to a place that I wouldn't have reached on my own. That evening, I was delivered a gift and I accepted. I moved. I don't know how. I breathed into the pit of despair and longing and shame and grief. I sobbed and moaned and curled up into child's pose whispering, "Baby, baby," not even knowing for whom I was speaking. I simply let go. I gave it all up to "what is". I detached from the constant *struggle* and *conflict* and *aching* and *wanting things to be different* and *missing the person I was* and *hating so much of what was now my life*. I just gave in. And I was absolutely changed forever.

Being able to let go and trust is a key part of my story's origins and yet, I was absolutely married to the belief that this kind of surrender and trust only comes as a culmination of a dramatic experience — an intense deep retreat experience or a life-changing tragedy or crisis — not something you can just live in every day. I'm still working on the everyday part, but what I've come to understand and fully believe with all my being is that it doesn't have to be hard all the time.

I didn't do my teacher training because I had a burning desire to teach. I had a burning desire to stop yelling at my kids. To stop feeling so shitty all the time. After graduation, I taught some friends and discovered *I am a damn good yoga teacher*. However, I had zero interest in a job in a yoga studio, subbing until I could fill a class or teaching at 6am.

It was while I was sitting at bike camp that summer, that I understood who I wanted to serve. It was my second year hosting iCan Bike, a five-day camp to teach kids with disabilities to ride a two-wheel bike independently. As I sat in the bleachers with the parents watching their kids gain a skill that they had not been able to teach them on their own and weren't sure would ever come, knowing all too well the guilt they likely felt about that, tears would stream down our faces.

I realized that the joy I was connecting with was the parents' joy, and how rare and fleeting it can be. I realized I wanted to help other special needs parents have more of these moments. More moments of letting go of the guilt, of simply and only feeling the joy, and feeling the full and loving support of those around them. Maybe feeling like they, too, could take on something that they never thought they could do. It occurred to me that offering a yoga class specifically for them might help them to find that, as it did for me.

So, I founded *The Calm Within The Chaos*, a monthly yoga and support circle for parents of kids with disabilities. My initial tagline:

"If locking yourself in the bathroom with a glass of wine is your idea of relaxation... This circle is for you."

Turns out, there were quite a few of us in those locked bathrooms. We shared our stories. We moved and remembered what it's like to actually *feel* relaxed.

We used all of the tools of Kripalu Yoga. We sat in witness of each other in both the pain and the celebrations. We learned *how* to celebrate. We understood that we *deserved* to celebrate, and accept help, and be happy and fulfilled adults. It was a sacred space where we could come together so we could fall apart.

The year of the pandemic has re-introduced, reinforced the idea that we must learn to be where we are.

It has laid bare the parts of our lives that don't work. Many special needs moms have joked that we are probably the most prepared for this kind of life. Isolated, without social interaction, needing to let go of expectations and change entire ways of living at a moment's notice. Welcome to OUR world.

I've never stopped learning. With my son's school gratefully open, I have continued to support our parents while getting attuned to Level 2 Reiki, as well as learning about the nervous system, trauma response, and embodiment principles that can help us stay grounded and feel safe.

The more I can stay connected to my body and my senses and get my mind to sit down and take a break, the more I am able to *maintain a deep trust in myself*. The more I feel like I did that moment by the river when I knew something had happened but I didn't know what, and it didn't matter.

I've gotten back in touch with a witchy, magical part of myself that had really faded away, and that I assumed didn't belong in a responsible woman's life. Letting her out to play has been a completion of a cycle, and it's brought me home to myself and enhanced my other practices, such as yoga and art. I don't have time for a lot of *doing*. I need ways of *being* that work and that help. My whole practice these past 8 years has been about seeing moments of my everyday life as opportunities to practice. "Let it be easy," one of my teachers said to me recently. That's the heart of what I teach.

Our lives are hard enough. You deserve to be seen as your best friends see you. A badass. A rock star. A kickass, strong woman who has so much to bring to life and needs a shoulder to both stand and cry on.

It's been the honor of my life to guide and witness the women in our circles as they come home to themselves. As they start businesses, get back to the writing they love, get their degree, or move on from the circle to find their joy in other endeavors.

I'm so grateful to all my teachers, to Kripalu yoga, to Dreamscape Healing Arts, Divine Feminine Yoga, and to my own stubborn determination to know myself and to find out how and under what circumstances I am happy; what activities, visuals, sensations bring me joy? What feels like ease to me? What does my life look, feel, sound, and taste like when it is "right" for me? And how do I know?

Yoga gives me so much, so many tools to find that out – really all the tools. Reiki keeps me in the place of letting go and trusting.

Something is shifting, a new phase. I'm stepping into a new level of leadership that feels so much closer to who I thought I'd be as that witchy, magical kid sitting by the river, and I can only hear the self-doubt when the wind is blowing a certain direction.

Today, I am the mom of a 13-year-old daughter and a 19-year-old son with Autism and I/DD (Intellectual/ Developmental Disability). He is a sweet, happy, super social young man who loves rollercoasters, the full moon, fireworks, the beach, *The Hobbit* and Larry David. He can't read sentences or write, can type only his first name, and would walk into traffic if he wasn't with someone to stop him. He will need supervision and assistance his entire life. I love him and my daughter with my whole heart. My husband and I are still happily married.

About Jane Kleiman



Jane Kleiman is a 200-Hour Certified Kripalu Yoga Instructor, Level 2 Reiki Practitioner, and lifelong spiritual seeker. In 2013, she founded The Calm Within The Chaos, A Movement and Support Circle for Parents of Kids with Disabilities, so that she could bring her experience, guidance and support to other struggling special needs parents.

She has also worked one-on-one with busy women who feel overwhelmed, stressed, and are longing to reclaim their lives for themselves. Her programs are in-person or online and will soon be developed into a guided at-home course.

To get information about future programs or to be notified of the launch of The Calm Within The Chaos At Home: <https://www.thecalmwithinthechaos.com/join-our-online-community.html>