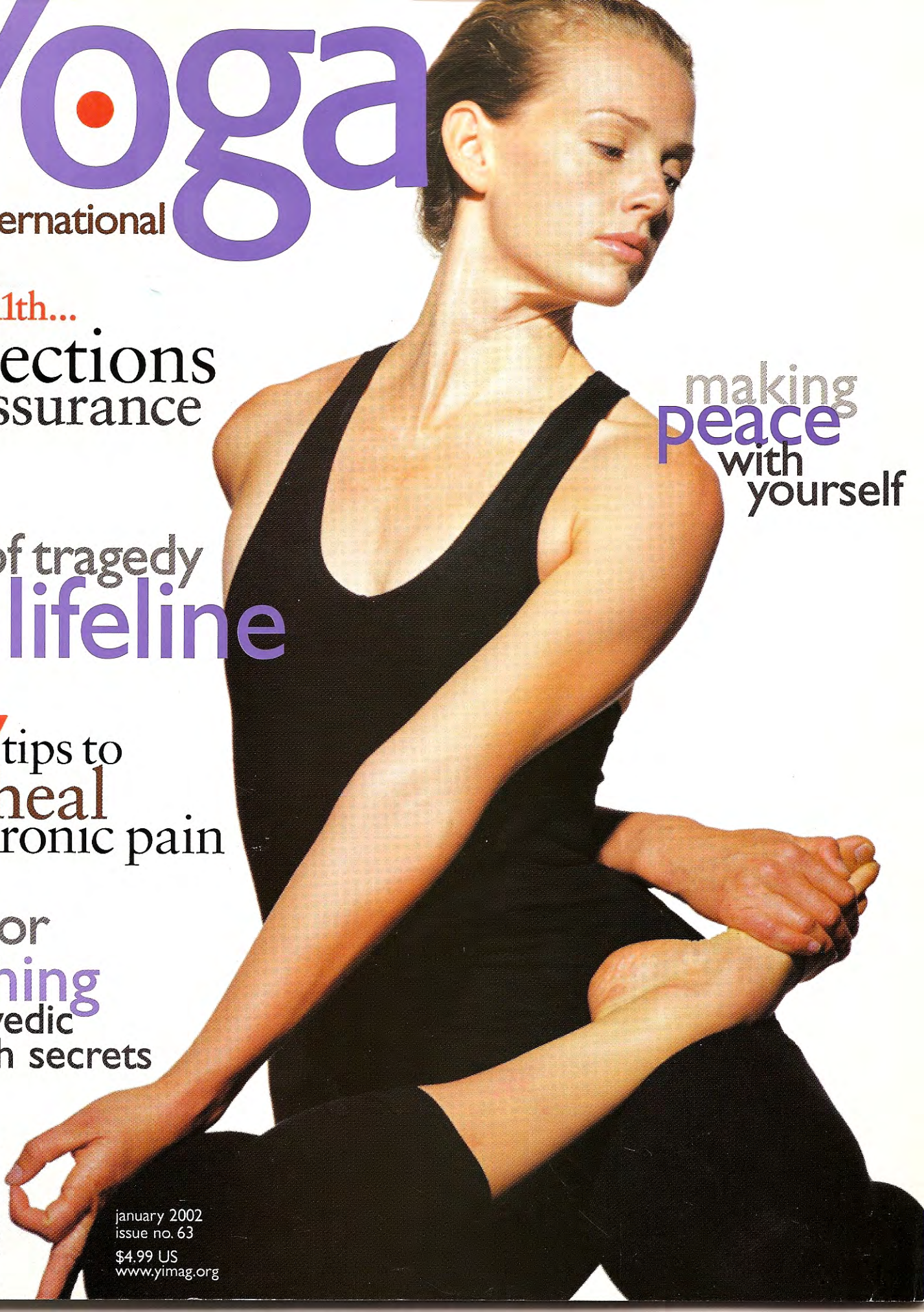
# Yoga International



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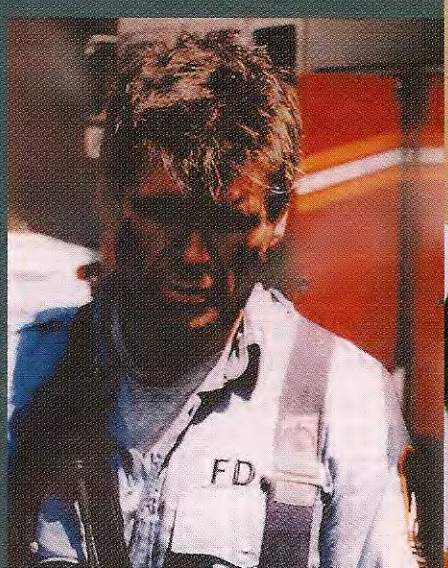
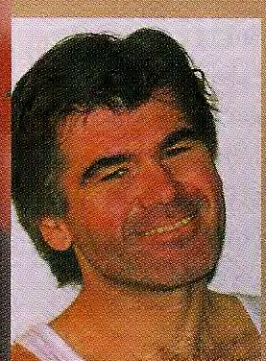
out of tragedy...

# a lifeline

BY KATHERINE PEW

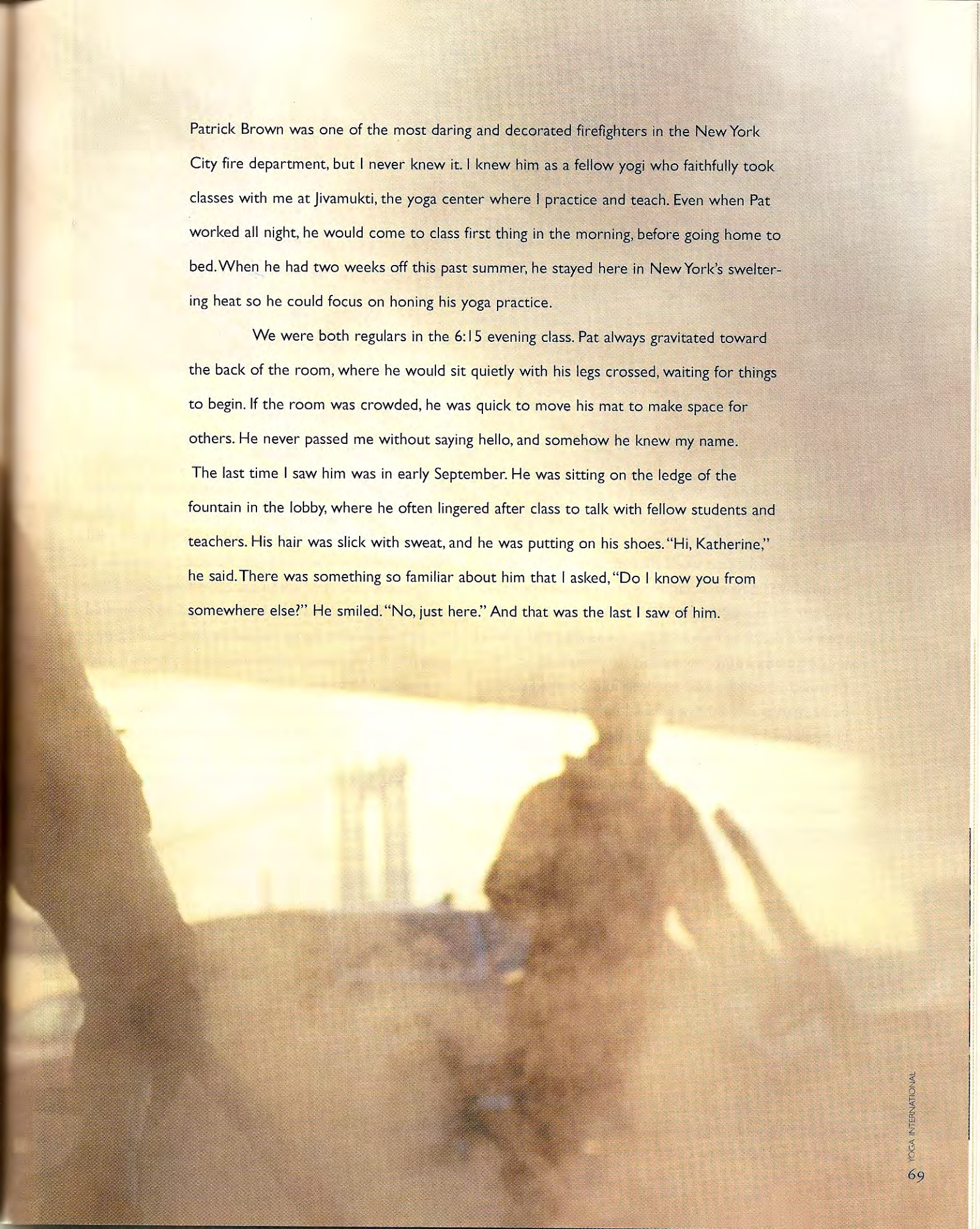


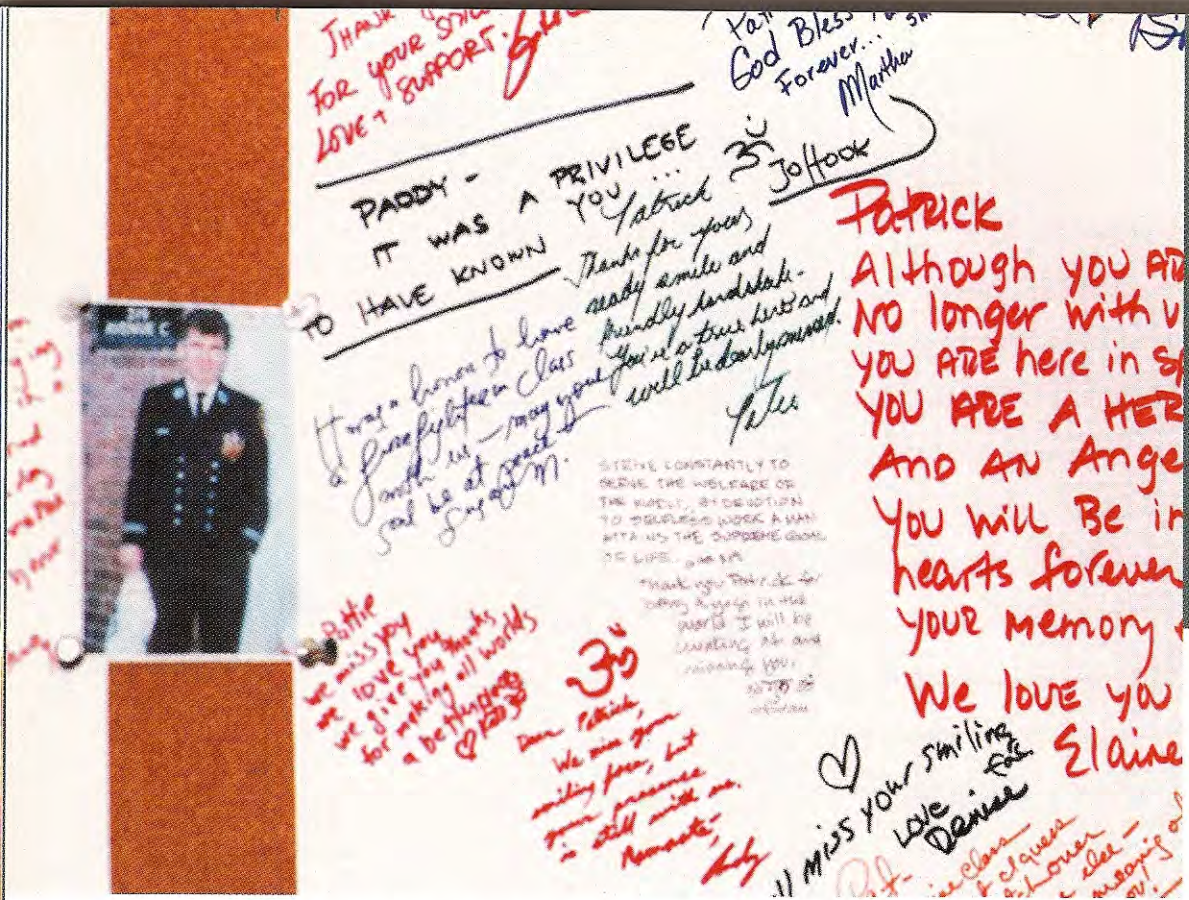



Patrick Brown was one of the most daring and decorated firefighters in the New York City fire department, but I never knew it. I knew him as a fellow yogi who faithfully took classes with me at Jivamukti, the yoga center where I practice and teach. Even when Pat worked all night, he would come to class first thing in the morning, before going home to bed. When he had two weeks off this past summer, he stayed here in New York's sweltering heat so he could focus on honing his yoga practice.

We were both regulars in the 6:15 evening class. Pat always gravitated toward the back of the room, where he would sit quietly with his legs crossed, waiting for things to begin. If the room was crowded, he was quick to move his mat to make space for others. He never passed me without saying hello, and somehow he knew my name.

The last time I saw him was in early September. He was sitting on the ledge of the fountain in the lobby, where he often lingered after class to talk with fellow students and teachers. His hair was slick with sweat, and he was putting on his shoes. "Hi, Katherine," he said. There was something so familiar about him that I asked, "Do I know you from somewhere else?" He smiled. "No, just here." And that was the last I saw of him.






'What can I teach a guy like this about right action?' He devoted his life to it.

For the first week after the attack, I holed up in Brooklyn, staying as far away from Manhattan as possible. I knew it would be good to get back to my yoga practice, and I knew that I would find comfort in the community of fellow teachers and students at Jivamukti, but I dragged my heels and cowered close to home, half paralyzed. I was in a kind of catatonic daze, bombarded by images of people clinging desperately to the windows of the blazing towers and jumping to their deaths, severed limbs strewn across sidewalks, and round-the-clock TV news coverage of "America Under Attack." I didn't turn the television off for a week.

I was sucked so far into the eye of the media hurricane that eventually I lost track of myself. I didn't meditate. I didn't practice asana. I didn't even want to pick up a spiritual book. I didn't see the point. I was thankful that I didn't have to teach because I felt ill-equipped to offer any kind of spiritual guidance. Whenever I watched TV or read the newspapers (which was all day long), I cried. Everything seemed hopeless. The world seemed like a bad place. I couldn't imagine anything that could make it right again.

I finally went to Ruth's class at Jivamukti the following Monday night. Ruth always has something good to say just when I need it most. She talked that night of the importance of not becoming so caught up in the terrible fragments of life that they eclipse our ability to see the whole—to see the beauty and love and compassion that arise and manifest even in the midst of despair. "When something like this happens," she said, "it feels as if those awful fragments can pierce right through us and become embedded in our heart, destroying everything positive. But there is a part of us that is peaceful, good, and impossible to disturb, even though we may lose awareness of it in dark times." She reminded us that yoga practice is the means we have to connect to that sweetness. When we chanted that night, the room was full of sobs, but the sense of unity was palpable.

After class, when I told Ruth how I'd been feeling, she empathized. "When those towers collapsed, I felt like all the yoga I'd practiced, for so many years, was gone in that instant," she said. "But then I realized it's still there. Your spiritual practice is more important than ever now. Now is the time to medi-

tate. Now is when we really need asana and chanting and *satsanga*. Don't abandon your yoga practice in a crisis. Don't lose everything we've been working lifetimes to glimpse."

As I was on my way out of class, a new photograph on the altar caught my eye. It was Patrick Brown. I stood there, stricken. Another teacher told me he was among the missing, that according to firefighter Brandon Gill, as Pat was heading up the stairs of the north tower of the World Trade Center on September 11, a fellow firefighter warned, "Don't go in there, Paddy!" But Pat forged ahead with eleven of his men, determined to rescue those trapped inside. "Are you nuts?" he yelled back over his shoulder. "We've got a job to do!"

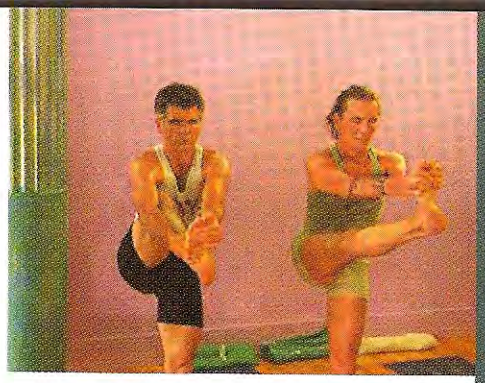
On the wall outside the classroom, pinned to the bulletin board, were two large sheets of posterboard where we could contribute our goodbyes to Pat. A fellow student had written, "When you were born, you cried and the world rejoiced. Live your life in such a way that when you die, the world cries and you rejoice." Another friend wrote simply, "And you admired my practice?!" Someone quoted Krishna from the *Bhagavad Gita* (3:19): "Strive constantly to serve the welfare of the world; by devotion to selfless work a man attains the supreme goal of life." All at once, after years of studying the yoga scriptures and aspiring to their ideals, the meaning of yoga became immediate and real to me.

Maria Rubinate, a fellow teacher, was standing nearby. She had dedicated her class that day to Pat. "When I was teaching from the *Gita* and Pat was in class, I was so humbled," she reflected. "I thought to myself, 'What can I teach a guy like this about right action?' He devoted his life to it, and he went out in a blaze of glory, dying in his attempt to serve others." Pat was the embodiment of perfect action. His selflessness was like a beacon of light amid the destruction and despair.

The next day, I stopped by Pat's firehouse, on 13th Street between Third and Fourth Avenues. A shrine had sprung up on the sidewalk outside. There were masses of flowers, votive candles, American flags, notes, drawings, and pictures from schoolchildren. Across the street was an NYU dorm, where students had hung signs in their windows, saying, "THANK YOU, LADDER NO. 3! FIREFIGHTERS RULE! WE LOVE YOU, FDNY! YOU'RE OUR NOBLE HEROES!" A group of firefighters from Los Angeles, wearing their LAFD shirts, stopped by to offer their support. People quietly folded their donations into envelopes and put them in a plastic lemonade pitcher.

On an easel stood a large frame with the photographs of the twelve firefighters from Ladder

His yearning to do something positive led him to become a firefighter.



Paddy called yoga a moving meditation. It put him on a different plane where he was at peace with himself.

Company 3 who were lost. There at the top was Patrick Brown dressed in uniform, with medals of valor crowding his chest. It turned out he had been the captain. He'd always been so unassuming, I'd had no idea. The walls of the firehouse were filled with thank-you letters and prayers. I stopped to read one from José Gallego, a man Pat had saved from a fire in a harrowing rope rescue on May 14, 1991. They had become close friends over the years. "Dear Pat Brown," he had written. "Thank you for saving my life. Thank you for your sincere friendship. I will always love you. God bless everyone of NYFD."

I introduced myself to Jim, the duty lieutenant, a big man with a husky voice. The nickname "WIND" was embroidered on his shirt. "We all loved Paddy," he said, his blue eyes wincing. "Everyone who knew him did. The yoga meant a lot to him. It helped him get through painful times, when he lost friends. He was a real open-minded guy. If Paddy had a strong opinion about something, it always came from looking at things from here," he said, opening his burly arms as wide as they would reach.

Elissa Wald, an old friend of Patrick's, says that when he was 17 Pat was sent overseas as a marine to fight in Vietnam. "As a boy, Paddy believed in what he was being called to do—to serve his country—but he had no way of knowing what he was in for. I guess there's no way to prepare any human being for the brutal reality of war. He could never come back home again in the same way. He had been to places within himself most people never have to go." Pat returned home to Queens after the war, highly decorated but bereft.

His yearning to do something positive led him to become a firefighter. "In some way, firefighting saved Paddy's life," says Wald. "When he joined the fire department, he had no interest in violence or hostile behavior ever again. He went from taking lives to saving lives. Firefighting was part of his spiritual practice." He also volunteered as a self-defense instructor, teaching karate to the blind, at the YMCA on 23rd Street.

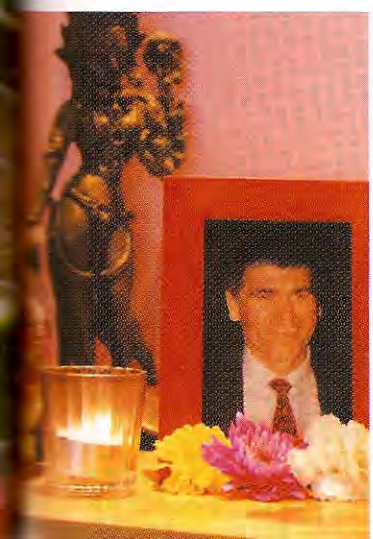
In the last two years of his life Pat discovered yoga. When he was interviewed about practicing yoga for *The Today Show* this past May at Jivamukti, he said, "The first day I came here, Kristin was teaching. When she got out the harmonium and started singing, I started crying. And then she gave this beautiful speech about yoga philosophy, which helped me out in a lot of ways. A lot of my friends have been killed in action in the fire department, and I was burned out emotionally. In a really deep way, this has rejuvenated my self. After all the tragic kinds of circumstances I've experienced, it's this—coming in here and practicing—that has given me a kind of solace and introspection. Aside from helping me deal with grief, it's really kind of helped me feel the beauty in life again."

"The chanting really hit him," says

Kristin. "It opened him up and allowed him to release his sadness. I was drawn to him right away and glad to have him in the room. He had metal in his shoulder and knee problems from running marathons and bicycle racing, but he never balked at any pose. He was committed to the yoga practice, and it was clear he really wanted to be there." Asana practice helped Pat let go of some of the tension that inevitably built up inside him, allowing him to find a sense of ease in his own body. He would often come to Kristin's two o'clock class on Sunday afternoon, work all night, and then come to her ten o'clock class on Monday morning before going home to sleep. "He appreciated whatever spiritual teaching I had to give," she says, "and he really listened, even when he came to my class three times in one week and I gave the same talk. He felt like he was in the right place; you could just tell." Pat also encouraged his fellow firefighters to take up yoga because it had helped him so much. He often brought along his 26-year-old godson, Jimmy, who was among those lost on September 11, or one of the other guys. "They saw the change it brought about in him—how much calmer it made him," says Kristin.

Pat kept urging his friend Wald to try yoga, and in the month before he died, she called to tell him she had gone to her first class. "I told him I started crying in the middle of class," she says. "I thought it was freaky—I had no idea it was a normal reaction. But he didn't find it strange at all—he found it a good thing. He acknowledged that yoga taps into your emotions and turmoil and allows you to release them."

"Paddy called yoga a moving meditation," says his friend Sharon Watts. "It put him on a different plane where he was at peace with himself, which he wasn't always in his everyday life. He tended to be hard on himself. Through practicing yoga, the self-doubts and self-judgment fell away, and he could be the pure person we all knew him to be. It brought him to another level—it elevated him. He'd had a hard, hard life, but he was really making progress. He was starting to find happiness."



"Patrick meditated regularly," says Wald. "He once told me that he brought the emptiness he strove for in meditation to firefighting. He would aspire to that state of mind in the midst of a rescue. In order to be most responsive, he had to be blank and alert and ready."

Hook & Ladder Company 3 is just a few blocks away from Union Square Park, where people from all over the city (and the country) have gathered to create their own World Trade Center Memorial. I wandered through the maze of candles, photographs, flowers, peace signs, flags, sculptures of doves, poems, drawings, and quotes from pacifists and spiritual leaders. Among the personal tributes I saw a dusty, well-worn pair of fireman's boots and a FDNY button-down shirt with a verse scrawled from Corinthians, left by someone who had lost a firefighter brother. Around a memorial of the Twin Towers made of hundreds of roses, a group gathered to sing "Amazing Grace."

As I knelt down to read what people had written, a passage from *The Alchemist*, by Paul Coelho, caught my attention: "It is we who nourish the Soul of the World; and the world we live in will be either better or worse, depending on whether we become better or worse. And that's where the power of love comes in. Because when we love, we always strive to become better than we are." To me this quote evokes the spirit of Captain Patrick Brown. The Soul of the World, although devastated by the events of September 11, has also been nourished and made better by the pure, selfless devotion of Pat Brown and his fellow rescue workers. His example, his willingness to lay down his own life to save the lives of strangers, humbles and inspires me to love to the fullest of my capacity every day, to overcome all obstacles, to strive always to be better. And when I am practicing yoga at Jivamukti, I unroll my mat next to the altar, so I can look at his photograph glowing in its little red frame in the candlelight, and be reminded of what I am really striving for when I practice yoga.

*Freelance writer Katherine Pew teaches at the Jivamukti Yoga Center in New York City.*