

Petra Nemcova is self-healing

A year after nearly dying in the tsunami, this model still finds life sweet. Interview by Elisabeth Egan

One minute I was packing up my suitcase, the next I was fighting for my life. I was in Thailand last December with my boyfriend, Simon Atlee [a fashion photographer], when the wave swept through our bungalow and carried us into its furious current. Simon was floating away quickly and screaming my name. Then he was gone.

I clung to a palm tree for eight hours until I was rescued. As the water receded, I felt the weight of my lower body and it was excruciating. It turned out I'd broken my pelvis and was bleeding internally. Despite my desperation and worry for Simon, I was overjoyed to be breathing. I practiced an energy healing technique known as spiritual human yoga, which I learned from a friend. You clear your mind and connect to a higher energy, then focus that energy on injured body parts. I'm convinced it helped me stay alive. Doctors predicted it would take two years for my injuries to heal, but it took about three months.

I couldn't feel sorry for myself. If I went down that road, I'd have never come back. Instead I tried to have a mind-over-matter attitude. Last New Year's Eve, when I was in so much pain, a Thai doctor taught me that by concentrating on something else, I might be able to reduce my discomfort. So I focused on beautiful moments, like decorating the Christmas tree with my family back home in Karviná, Czech Republic.

Before the tsunami, I was addicted to laxatives. I began taking them at the end of 2002. Eventually, I was up to six a day and feeling incredibly drained. Like many models, I'd been told I needed to lose 10 pounds, and even though I was getting a lot of positive feedback about my appearance, I wanted my stomach to be smaller. Finally, I reached a point where I felt weak and exhausted, so with Simon's encouragement, I started tapering from six pills to five, and so on. I took the last pills a few days before the tsunami. Now I treat my body with the respect it deserves. There's so much suffering in the world, I don't want to inflict more on myself for no reason.

I'm still amazed by the complete strangers who reached out to me over the past year. They inspire me every day and make me feel even more driven to help others. Right now, I'm raising money for the Happy Hearts Fund [www.give2asia.org/happyheartsfund.php], which I created to help kids affected by the tsunami. Eventually, I hope to help children around the world, whether they're in Thailand, New Orleans or Pakistan.

"The mind is a tool—if we use it properly it can help us get better," says Nemcova, 26.



All the proceeds from the book I've written, *Love Always, Petra* [Warner], will go to the fund. I have always found charity work to be far more interesting than, say, going shopping.

I learned so much from Simon—mainly how to laugh at myself and be in the moment. Even a year after his death, I feel so connected to him. He's in my thoughts, and I often think of what he would do or say. He taught me to listen to the past, live in the present and look to the future. So I do. I'll spend December 26 at a beautiful beach house with his family and mine; it will be a bittersweet anniversary for us. Simon's favorite saying was "A day without laughter is a day wasted," so that's what we'll keep in mind.

STEWART SHINING; STYLING: KATY ROBBINS; HAIR: BRADLEY IRION; MAKEUP: GLENN WARTZAL; MANICURE: JIN SOON; CHOI FOR JIN SOON NATURAL HAND & FOOT SPA; SEE GET-IT GUIDE.