

For Reinventing Oneself in Retirement
The Gift of Gifting
Rhonda Ashurst

I retired young, before I was fifty. My retirement came on the heels of my father's death and a health crisis which left my mother unable to care for herself for several weeks. After she was back on her feet, I had to figure out what to do with myself. Suddenly, I was facing an identity crisis—who am I if I don't have an answer to the question, "What do you do?"

Fortunately, I was not a stranger to the process of reinventing myself. Looking back, I realized I'd been doing it my whole life. During my working years, I went from Shepherdess/Horse Trainer to Computer Consultant/Instructor to Psychotherapist to Health Club Owner to Outdoor Guide & Outfitter to Real Estate Investor to Life Coach to Storage Facility Marketing Manager. So, I figured, what's another life transition? This one should be easy, since I don't have to make money anymore. I bet you can look back on your own career path and find that you too have experience with reinventing yourself.

From my perspective, retirement is that delightful time in life when you can do what you love without needing to generate income. Retirement from the employment/money making machine that ran our younger lives gives us freedom reminiscent of childhood, and that is a powerful fuel from which to ignite your personal passions.

So I asked myself, what do I want to do with this freedom now? As luck would have it, I already had a spacious office I'd rented during a move two years before. At the time I signed the lease, I needed a place for all my old psychotherapy/life coaching stuff and I guess I wasn't ready to let go of that part of my life. I entertained the possibility that I might return to one or both of those careers again. Since moving in, I had only occasionally used it for quiet time and some yoga practice.

I was at a party one night after mom recovered, and I mentioned having this space to my neighbor. She was interested in learning more about belly dancing, which I had done semi-professionally in my thirties, and also about yoga. We came up with this fun idea to get together in my office for "play dates". We decided that at our age, having play dates was an idea worth resurrecting!

I had such a blast I started sharing my excitement with other friends. To my surprise, this often led to, "That sounds like exactly what I need, can I come play with you?" Pretty soon I had 4-5 play dates a week with friends and my partner, Scott, joined in too. I met with everyone individually initially. I would always begin by asking, "What do you feel like doing today?" Then, I would improvise a session based on the answer.

I didn't see myself as a teacher and I sometimes wondered exactly what was I doing and where it was going. Knowing there was a lot I didn't know, I studied yoga and tai chi in greater depth so that I would have new information, moves and postures to share. As my repertoire expanded, I'd incorporate more than one practice in a session. I might begin with yoga, throw

in some tai chi, dance a little, do some more yoga, and then end with meditation. Sometimes the movement would unlock emotions and the need to process, so we'd sit down on the chairs in the back of the room and talk. Turns out my background in psychotherapy and healing does still have a place in my life.

No two sessions were ever the same. Over time, some of my friends' partners joined in with them so they could learn together and support each other in doing the practices at home. The woman who works in the office next to my studio asked me one day, "What do you do in there?" The answer led to weekly sessions when she gets off work, and a new friendship. Now I sometimes do two sessions a day.

Because all of this began originally as play dates, I approached it as a gift freely given to my friends. I wanted to share these life-changing practices that I have studied for years with others. I wasn't a certified teacher, so I didn't consider it a business. Like the rest of this experiment, the gifting piece has also gone through an evolution. What I didn't consider was the need for those who received my gifts to give something in return. I was challenged by them to find ways they could give back to me and to accept their gifts, gracefully. It surprised me how hard that was. But it became easier with time and a deepening understanding that reciprocity in relationships is important.

I have been given some of the most amazing gifts: shamanic healings, beautiful scarves made by the hands of one of my friends, a guest membership for myself and my partner at a lovely spa/hot springs resort, lovely flowers, produce from a garden, the most amazing hair styles I've ever had, meals at great restaurants, tickets to shows, momentos for my studio, help with caring for our animals, and the list goes on.

I am now in the third year of gifting in my studio. Yes, I do actually call it a studio now. I've also noticed that they have begun calling me "teacher." I remember being hesitant about that at first, unwilling to see myself as a teacher because I wasn't officially certified. My students (yeah, I got over that too), reminded me that 30+ years on the mat and seven years of teaching qualifies me. I've heard it said that you teach what you need to learn and this has certainly been true for me. I am a better student now that I teach, because I pay closer attention so I can share what I learn with my students. My confidence as a teacher has grown over these three years and I have become increasingly devoted to sharing the spiritual depths of these ancient practices.

The important thing to remember when reinventing yourself in retirement is that you already have a wealth of experience to share. Our mission now is to give away all we have learned in this lifetime, and to keep learning and growing while we teach and serve our community. Opportunities abound to volunteer or find other creative ways to give yourself and all your valuable experiences, insights and wisdom away (you can't take it with you), and to accept the gifts given in return with gratitude.