

FOUR DAYS OF CHANGE

Faced with starting a new career, the author attends a workshop for finding purpose in third age.

BY NANCY S. HARDAWAY

I drove into the pine-shaded parking lot in Wellfleet and sat wondering what the next four days of a workshop entitled "The Next Phase" would be like. Somewhat apprehensively, I entered the building and walked into a group of strangers, male and female evenly balanced, ages from somewhere in the late 40s to perhaps late 70s. I saw no familiar faces, just others who, like myself, were looking for their name tags and packets, and searching for some learning, some answers, perhaps. We participants had come from all over. Awkward meet-and-greet conversation blended Southern drawls, Mid-Western twangs, and even voices that spoke of faraway homes – Israel, Sweden.

Billed as a "leading edge program for exploring an emerging stage of life," the workshop was supposed to address the angst that can come about when the major work of building a career and raising a family is already accomplished. With many active years ahead, we wonder, What next? The brochure talked about the challenges of reexamining old

About the author

Nancy Hardaway, with her varied careers, is either a Renaissance woman or a quick-change artist, depending on your viewpoint. From teaching, to an entrepreneur with a real estate agency and building company, to sales and marketing, then into banking and financial services, Nancy has specialized in nurturing ideas and leading transformations. On the side, she likes to golf (had a hole in one on her 50th birthday), ski, paint, and write. She lives in Yarmouth with her husband, Larry Peterson, a builder, and son, Trevor Harrison. She recently started coaching professional women in success strategies and business transformations.



GESTALT INTERNATIONAL STUDY CENTER PHOTO

The non-profit Gestalt International Study Center, located in Wellfleet, offers a variety of workshops and training sessions. Gestalt is a holistic form of psychotherapy aimed at heightening the individual's self-awareness and perception of the moment, especially in terms of their relationships with other people and their environment.

dreams put aside, finding new interests, maintaining passion ... a hefty goal for just four days with strangers. And was I at this "next phase" anyway?

It had started months earlier, this sort of itchy feeling that I could or should look at my life and my choices a little differently. My job with a large local business had ended with its acquisition by a larger regional company. Not wanting to be so far removed from the major strategic decisions, I chose the severance package. But now I was without the big title, without the daily challenges, and no longer a part of that larger community. About the same time, my daughter graduated from Williams College, and I was accompanying my son to Vermont, New Hampshire, and Boston to see where he wanted to apply to college. Empty-nesting was imminent. And the AARP magazine had started coming

regularly.

So what did I want to do when I grew up? I was not ready to retire, with college costing \$40,000-plus per year, and I still had a sense of more to accomplish in this world. But maybe I'd chose to work a bit differently: maybe non-profit, maybe start a business or buy one? What about the law school I'd been accepted to but never attended? Or art – I'd had a few exhibits some years earlier, but then I stopped painting when work became too demanding. Perhaps a book? Too many choices, none of them appealing enough to move toward. How could I learn to make decisions differently, when before I always made them to benefit husband and children – using their needs and wants as my measure?

I had met Edwin Nevis who founded with his wife, Sonia March Nevis, of the Gestalt International Study Center, only

Quickhits

Gestalt International Study Center

1035 Cemetery Road/P.O. Box 515
So. Wellfleet, MA 02663
508-349-7900
www.gisc.org

"The Next Phase" workshop
3 p.m. Thurs., Oct. 6 to Noon Sun., Oct. 9
Fee: \$530; Members, \$480

once, finding out about this learning community in Wellfleet from people in California. Although Ed has an international reputation in organizational development, has published multiple books, and had been on the faculty at MIT, it was none of those credentials that sold me on the workshop. It was simply that he is one of those people with so much integrity and warmth that you trust him immediately, and when I talked about my confusion and he said, "Come to "The Next Phase workshop," I signed up. Maybe I was facing "the next phase." I'd soon find out.

I'm not sure how the leaders did it, but somehow they eased us strangers into group interaction painlessly. We divided into groups by interests, sports or arts or travel. Then regrouped as a whole and talked about what we hoped to get from the workshop. I found others in similar circumstances, "figuring out a new model for success and living," "breaking out of a pre-packaged mold," and others looking at "reworking relationships," "exploring creative processes,"

Change

CONTINUED FROM PAGE 52

and "grieving the transition." I heard a familiar theme, that sense of time no longer being infinite. The word "passion" came up a lot. We had a chance to share who we were and listen to who we were with, all in an environment that encouraged honesty.

The next day was devoted to exploring "Where Have I Come From/Where am I Now?" There was a richness to the exercises that I expect came from the variety of people who had created this unusual workshop - corporate executives, consultants, academics, therapists. I was surprised at what I learned about my own past through the River of Life exercise.

Sometimes working with one other person, sometimes in small groups, sometimes with the whole group together in the big meeting room, we drew maps of our lives, we talked about our physical selves and our health, we explored our values. Sonia Nevis, a world renowned trainer of family therapists and an incredibly sensitive and lively woman, talked about the building of life experience with awe.

"Be proud of failings! You've tried them; you're enriched," she said. "If you try lots of different things, you won't end your life with a lot of regrets."

I drove home that night with a gentler acceptance and respect for my failures and a greater honor for my accomplishments, and perhaps a bit of wisdom about how each supported the other.

On Saturday, the work turned toward the future through visualization and exploring decisions. We looked at not just the content of the decisions we've made (the choice of this road or that), but also at the process of how we arrived at a decision. A bit of research was presented, along with some personal experiences. Leave a judgeship for landscape design? Support a grown daughter? They talked about "changing the boundaries of the decision." I hadn't really thought about how I made decisions

before, just that the decisions at work were always easier than personal choices.

With more learning on how to have important conversations and straight talk, the strangers that had arrived on Thursday, now on Sunday had become friends. We were a circle of friends that looked concretely at what all this talk meant for our own futures, whether work or retirement, new homes or new friends, relationships with parents or with children. Tools for change were shared, along with a developmental worksheet. We made plans, we discussed what would come next, we challenged, we supported each others' goals. And then we left for homes nearby and far away. It was hard to say good-bye.

Did I find an answer?

No, but I started a process that continues on. Just a few days ago I received a workshop follow-up packet that talked about change as ongoing.

"We come to terms with the idea that there are no finishing lines or truly completed projects in life. We are all living in a construction site," read the literature for the "Making Life and Career Choices in the Third Phase of Life" program, developed by Douglas T. Hall, Penny Backman, Marcy Cray, Edwin C. Nevis, Sonia M. Nevis, and Joyce Wheeler.

I still haven't chosen a new career, but I'm open to new possibilities. The workshop did help me to find courage and patience. So I guess that's where I'm at, in the next phase, a construction site, a work in progress, with opportu-

nities for new adventure, and doors to open while others close.

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SONIA NEVIS
CO-FOUNDER
GESTALT
INTERNATIONAL
STUDY CENTER