

Popular workshop focuses on facing down life-changing events

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The workshops led by Susie Leonard Weller, left, and Peggy Capes are for people ready to make changes in their lives.

If you go

What: “The Art and Practice of Living with Nothing and No One Against You” workshop.

Description: Participants will reframe and reflect on experiences, past and present, and transform moments and experiences by choosing to see them differently.

When: Sept. 20, 6 to 9 p.m. and Sept. 21, 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Plus three follow-up sessions.

Where: Unity Spiritual Center of North Idaho in Coeur d’Alene, 4465 N. 15th St.

Cost: \$115. **Registration required:** (208) 664-1125 or unity@unitycenter.org (<mailto:unity@unitycenter.org>)

Reframing your life

Susie Leonard Weller of Liberty Lake recently emailed this note to Boomer U: “One of the big issues facing boomers like myself is that at some point in our life there is some event – a divorce, loss of job, death of a loved one or a health issue – that feels like the world we once knew is falling apart. And despite having good coping skills, they’re not enough to face this particular challenge or series of disturbing events.”

Weller and Peggy Capes of Rathdrum will present a workshop Sept. 20-21 at the Unity Spiritual Center of North Idaho that will help others examine life-changing events and frame healthy responses to those events.

It’s titled the “Art and Practice of Living with Nothing and No One Against You.” The workshop – pioneered by Midwest Unity ministers Gary Simmons and Rima Bonario – is catching fire with Unity church members, and interested others, throughout the country.

Even if you can’t attend their workshop, these women serve as role models for other boomers facing challenging, life-changing events. They discovered that when you can’t change the situation, you work on changing yourself.

Susie Leonard Weller, 59

Weller was always a woman who felt no challenge was too difficult to master. She’s taught at the Community Colleges of Spokane for 24 years; the last 14 in the

Peggy Capes and Susie Leonard Weller offer several strategies to deal with life-changing events, such as divorce, death of a loved one or a major health issue, based on their own life experiences, their professional training and their art and practice workshop.

Here's just a sample:

- Face your fears in constructive ways.

When people feel threatened by life's events they can't control, they often react to the fear in unhealthy ways. These include fighting and getting angry, blaming others, fleeing the situation or doing nothing, forgetting the fear through drinking, drugging, overeating or by trying to fix other people's problems.

Instead, Weller said people can "face the reality of the situation, rather than deny or avoid it. Feel whatever you're feeling, reframe what's happened to you, focus on what you can change and let go of what you can't, forgive yourself and others. Move on."

- Be aware of the stories you tell about yourself.

"Our stories define us," Weller said. "Do I tell my story in a way that says, 'Poor me, I'm a victim.' Or do I tell my story in a way that says 'This is the journey I went on, and even though I didn't always like the circumstances, I appreciate the gifts of saying yes to the journey.'"

- Seek out new experiences that stretch you.

When tragic or challenging events upend your life, adding one more thing feels impossible. But saying yes to new experiences may refocus you in a good way.

Five years ago, Capes was chosen to train with the founders of the art and practice workshop at Unity

Adult Basic Education division, teaching adults how to embrace new chapters in their lives.

Weller has a master's degree in pastoral ministry from Seattle University and certification in spiritual direction from Gonzaga University.

When she married her husband, Mark Weller, 29 years ago, Weller's maid of honor described her as a "chainsaw through butter."

She chain-sawed her way through family tragedies. Her mother, plagued with mental illness, died at 49 of a heart attack "brought on by fasting for spiritual reasons," Weller said. "Despite my best efforts I could not help my mom express her deep faith in healthier ways."

Her brother died at 47 of a heart attack after exercising too vigorously.

Her father had a heart attack at 39, and a stroke in his 50s, and after being diagnosed with diabetes, he began drinking himself to sleep. He died at 78, an alcoholic who spent his last years in bed.

"The modeling in my immediate family was to die young or die a slow death," she said.

The life-changer: On Nov. 24, 2006, Weller – who had been experiencing lower intestinal problems for months – was diagnosed with colon cancer, stage 3. "I thought no problem, this is a challenging inconvenience."

In one year, Weller had six surgeries, followed by six weeks wearing a chemotherapy pack day and night. She then underwent surgery for a temporary colostomy (a collection device for human waste) and after the colostomy was reversed, she underwent another 12 weeks of intense chemotherapy.

Weller powered through it all, optimistic, because it was

Village in Missouri.

Despite her busy life, she made it a priority. Now, she teaches the workshops regularly.

all going to be temporary.

Falling apart: Eighteen months after her cancer treatment ended, it became apparent that Weller needed a permanent colostomy.

And those tingling, burning, painful sensations in her feet? Neuropathy. Also permanent.

“My colostomy nurse said she’d never met anyone in her life who tried harder to avoid a permanent colostomy,” Weller said.

Weller felt rage. She thought: “OK God, I’ve been a good girl. I’ve been faithful to you. I’ve been of service.

“In the 24 years (at the Community Colleges) I’d used maybe five days of sick leave. I was healthy, exercising and doing all the right things and then to have this happen and be permanent and I (can’t) control it?”

Weller agreed to the permanent colostomy. She chose Jan. 6, 2009, for her surgery; it was the Feast of the Epiphany, the celebration of the wise men bearing gifts for the baby Jesus.

“I said, ‘OK, three gifts. I want compassion. I want wisdom. I want joy.’ ”

The surrender: Two months after the permanent colostomy surgery, Weller was swimming when her shoulder froze; the ailment – unrelated to her cancer treatment – became a symbol of all the feelings frozen inside her.

“The frozen shoulder told me I had hit a wall and to get through it would take a different framework,” she said.

She felt like the stream in a Sufi parable. The stream tries unsuccessfully to cross the desert in its water form.

“But when it surrendered, the stream could be the wind that crossed over and fell as rain on the other side,” Weller said.

The “Art and Practice of Living with Nothing and No One Against You” workshop helped Weller cross over to the other side in her journey of acceptance. She started the workshop on June 26, 2010, the third anniversary of her father’s death.

“It felt like a wink from him for me to finally heal all the family pain,” she said.

Weller worked on forgiving her health care providers.

“All my permanent side effects are from the lifesaving treatments,” she said. “When I was getting the neuropathy, they said, ‘Don’t worry. It will go away.’ But for 20 percent of people, it’s permanent. From their point of view, it was a life and death issue. So I had to (forgive) and say they were doing the best they knew how to do.”

Life now: Weller – who once could not talk about her colostomy without “crying every single time”– leads a support group for others with them.

She regularly writes for Phoenix Magazine, a publication for people who use “medical appliances” for waste elimination.

She recently wrote about traveling to Australia and New Zealand and included tips on traveling internationally when you wear a colostomy bag.

Weller took up paddleboarding this summer. The neuropathy is still permanent, the colostomy too, but what has changed is Weller’s attitude toward the permanence.

“I still get pissed, especially when I have an ‘accident,’ ” she said. “But then I shift my attitude. I put my hand on my heart and ask what am I willing to be grateful for at this moment? I thank God for this (colostomy) technology that allows me to travel to Australia and New Zealand. When I shift to the gratitude, it allows me to live the life I want to live.”

Peggy Capes, 68

Capes was stricken with polio when she was 19 months old. “Doctors said I would never walk, but my mother forced me to face life.”

Her father, though a kind man, had trouble supporting his family.

“One of the myths I grew up with was that men are necessary, but they aren’t really any good,” Capes said. “They will not support you. When my dad died, there was no money.”

Capes turned into an overachiever. She has two master’s degrees – in education and in social work. She married and divorced twice, and one day found herself in her 40s a single mother of two children who was working while going to graduate school.

“I used alcohol for awhile,” she said. “I left the house at 6:30 in the morning and came home at 6:30 at night, and I’d pour myself a couple of glasses of wine and things looked not so bad.”

The life-changers: For Capes, it wasn't one life-changing event, but an accretion of behaviors she had to face in order to change. Several years ago, she started going to Alcoholics Anonymous to get into recovery for her drinking, and she also joined Debtors Anonymous to face the consequences of her money issues.

"At my age I (must) continue to work when most people my age are talking about how wonderful retirement is," she said.

Letting go: Taking – and then leading – the art and practice workshops allowed Capes to finally uncover the beliefs and practices that trapped her into a low-income lifestyle.

"I was able to go back to my earliest memory. I was 6 years old. I was sitting at the dining room table. My father had been a pilot, and he'd gotten out of the Air Force, and hadn't found any (job) that worked for him, and what I got from that was there is always going to be a problem with money.

"I was able to go back and look at that message and see how it ruled my life. When I've had some money it's certainly gone away, and I've made choices that weren't financially smart. It helped me ask: 'Where did it come from, and how can I go forward from here more conscious of my choices?' "

Life now: Capes feels gratitude that her personal and professional work – and her lifelong spiritual quest – enables her now to lead others through the art and practice workshops. She's also amazingly healthy, despite her post-polio syndrome. She's looking forward to living fully this newest chapter of her life.

"My mother died two months ago," she said. "I'm now the matriarch. I come from a long line of strong women, and I honor that, but some of it comes out in negative ways. I want to be a *loving* matriarch. I have learned to identify things that are important – friends, family, working out and gardening."