

YOGINI is the first book to explore what yoga means to older women through the personal stories of ten women, who range in age from 63 to 85. Their fascinating experiences reveal why yoga is so compelling, so necessary and so gratifying as they get older. And how they evolve in mind, body and spirit at an age most believe they are done growing.

YOGINI:

Ageless Women, Timeless Tradition

by Patricia Gottlieb Shapiro

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YOGINI

A woman with short, wavy white hair is sitting in a meditative lotus position on a grassy lawn. She is wearing a white short-sleeved top and grey pants. Her eyes are closed, and her hands are resting on her knees in a mudra. The background is a lush green park with trees and a clear sky. The overall mood is peaceful and serene.

AGELESS WOMEN, TIMELESS TRADITION

PATRICIA GOTTLIEB SHAPIRO

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Also by Patricia Gottlieb Shapiro

- *The Privilege of Aging: Portraits of Twelve Jewish Women*
- *Coming Home to Yourself: Eighteen Wise Women Reflect on Their Journeys*
- *Yoga for Women at Midlife & Beyond: A Home Companion*
- *Always My Child: A Parent's Guide to Understanding Your Gay, Lesbian, Bisexual, Transgendered or Questioning Son or Daughter* (with coauthor)
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Contents

Introduction	1
Rayna Griffin, 69: Gaining Inspiration.....	19
Susan Little, 85: Finding Strength.....	29
Naomi C. Rose, 63: Being Present	39
Jean Backlund, 83: Becoming Confident	49
Elizabeth Terry, 70: Accepting Herself.....	59
Rosemary Thompson, 73: Restoring a Healthy Balance	69
Ana Franklin, 74: Weathering Grief	77
Lillian Weilerstein, 83: Striving for Order	89
Dottie Murphy Morrison, 77, and Em McIntosh, 78: Deepening Friendship	97
Conclusion.....	107
Acknowledgments	109
Glossary	111
Related Reading	113

Introduction

Doing yoga as an older woman can transform how you feel about yourself and how you view aging. Listen to what Rayna Griffin had to say: “Yoga really changed me. It helped me open my heart and mind, and expand as a person. I’m digging deeper now. I’m learning, growing and discovering more about myself every day.” She is 69, an age at which psychologists in the past thought people stopped growing.

Sadly, many older people do stop growing. They still spend their “golden” years in a static way: sitting on the porch constantly checking their email or watching cable television all day. But for those who do want to keep developing, the later years can be rich and rewarding.

We now know that growth does not stop at age 65. The years beyond 65 are their own developmental period, just like midlife and adolescence: a stage of *becoming*, not just being. The psychologist Erik Erikson told us that after age 65 you have a choice between integrity and despair. If you choose integrity, the later years can be a period of expanding mentally, strengthening physically, deepening emotionally, and evolving spiritually.

That's the positive side of aging. But, of course, everything is not all rosy as we age; another side exists as well. It is also a period of tremendous loss. We face losses in relation to our own health and wellbeing, we lose friends and partners to illness and death, and ultimately, we face our own mortality.

We know we're not perfect and hope we're not finished growing, but we're in a very different space than when we were younger. We are not constantly second guessing ourselves or desperately seeking approval of everyone we meet. If "they" don't like us, that's their problem. We're fine with who we are. And if our "fine" is a little shaky, yoga can give us the confidence we need.

Jean Backlund, 82, whom you'll meet in these pages, noticed a big change in her attitude after she had taken yoga classes for a while. "When I was younger, I was always somewhat quiet and introverted," she told me. "But now I can stand up in front of a group and talk. I use my relaxed breathing techniques before I speak to a group and I'm fine, much to my amazement."

The media tells us that 70 is the new 50, and there's actually some truth to this. Seventy is no longer old, but it's also very different from 50 and 60. Like the fifties, the sixties and seventies can be full of vitality and life, but the later years contain a sober twist: there's a recognition of how fleeting time is and how

precious each moment. We have seen our lives and our friends' lives transformed on a dime with a shocking diagnosis of ovarian cancer, a heart attack on a treadmill, or a brutal car accident—reminding us that each day is indeed a gift. And on those days when “nothing” happens and life seems quiet and boring, we remember these days are precious, too, as this familiar quote from author Mary Jean Orion reminds us: “Normal day, let me be aware of the treasure you are.”

Many have said, in fact, that this is the best time in their lives, that they've never been more content, and that their days are richer and fuller than in the past. Maybe the reason for this richness is that we know—whether we talk about it or not—that our days are finite, and thus, more cherished.

These are the issues that form the background of this book, ***YOGINI: Ageless Women, Timeless Tradition***. It contains the stories of ten women—narratives of physical and emotional healing, of overcoming adversity, and of spiritual renewal. These women come from all parts of the United States, study in different yoga traditions, and range in age from 63 to 85.

Some women are trying yoga for the first time at age 65 or 70; others have come back to yoga at that age after a hiatus of 20 or 30 years. Still others, like Ana Franklin, have been practicing consistently for 50 years. What keeps her practicing after all these

years? “I could have gone off the deep end if I didn’t have my practice,” she said. “My practice kept me sane and alive.”

In this book, you’ll meet women who only go to class once a week but have incorporated the principles of yoga into their lives. That makes them a serious yoga student to me. Women like this are living their yoga, what’s known as “off the mat,” even though they may only be “on the mat” (practicing in class or at home) once a week. What counts is how important yoga is to them, how passionate they feel about it, and how pervasive its principles are to their actions and behaviors.

I interviewed many women to find the ten who appear in this book. Part of the inspiration for this book was an interview with Alice Ladas, age 96. Alice said yoga was her “constant companion,” that she mostly did yoga to remain healthy and flexible. She would certainly win the prize for doing yoga the longest. She started in the 1940s doing yoga with Jack LaLanne and followed along as she watched Liliias Folan’s television program, “Yoga and You,” as she raised her two young daughters.

In other situations you’ll read about, yoga does its magic in unknown ways. Take painter and sculptor Rayna Griffin: she had lost all inspiration until she discovered yoga, which freed and inspired her in new ways. Or Jean Backlund, who refused to leave her house for a year after her husband died. When her neighbors dragged Jean to a yoga class, it turned her life around.

What's different about these stories is that the women are all beyond midlife. They are practicing regularly at an age when conventional wisdom says they are too old for yoga, yet they are reaping its many benefits. Strength, flexibility, and balance are more available, as well as the calm and peace of mind so important as we get older and face the many challenges that accompany aging.

CONNECTION AND CAMRADERIE

When older women practice together, something different happens. So many women have told me how incompetent they feel when they're in a yoga class with twentysomethings and the younger women are standing on their heads or contorting themselves into positions impossible for older bodies.

Lillian Weilerstein, 83, whom you'll meet in these pages, told me, "I never did a handstand. You make your choices. You don't worry about what someone else is doing. When I was younger, I was more self-conscious. After I turned 80, I didn't care what everyone thinks."

When older women practice with their peers, they feel a sense of camaraderie and community. A bond is created when they breathe together and move together. There's a degree of comfort because they know that these women are like them. Everyone has "something" going on. Whether it's a bad back, osteoporosis, or

cancer, everyone knows that the others in class have their own unique challenges and their own source of *duhkha* (suffering).

For some older women, *duhkha* stems from physical or health challenges like the ones just mentioned. For others, it is emotional difficulties that create *duhkha*. They include making decisions about how and where to live, coming to terms with regrets, contending with issues and anxieties about getting older, and losing friends and family members.

Whether our own personal *duhkha* comes from physical or emotional pain, we can learn from it. Among the things we learn from our own suffering and by studying ourselves through yoga are patience, compassion, and gratitude.

And we gain wisdom. Although we may not sense it every day, our long lives have indeed granted us wisdom. When my daughter calls and says, “Mom, I need some motherly advice” or a friend says, “I need to talk to you,” I know that I have learned a few things in my 70+ years, and what I can offer in terms of compassion, empathy and understanding is hard won.

YOGA FOR OLDER WOMEN

Time goes faster as we age. The only way to slow it down is to live in the moment and appreciate that moment. For that, yoga is our guide. If we can learn to breathe and focus on a single breath

in class, we can take that skill off the mat and make it part of our everyday life.

Of course, you can do yoga at any age, but something different happens when you practice as an older woman. You have a seasoned perspective that you didn't have when you were younger. You have a long history and by now, you know what's important and what's not. You know your body well and know how to listen to it and heed what you hear.

Your goals are different as you age and you have more compassion for yourself. You're not striving for a perfect pose as you did when you were younger. Instead, you want to protect and preserve your physical and emotional health. That means if you wake up particularly stiff one morning, you may need to do more warm-ups than usual. Or if you're feeling sluggish or tired, you may choose to practice in a chair. There's nothing wrong with this: It's where you are at this particular moment on this particular day, and this, too, will change.

As you age, function becomes more important than form as it becomes more and more challenging to recreate that ideal classical pose. Your body just won't do certain things anymore; it won't move in certain ways. On the positive side, this gives you an opportunity to learn about yourself *while you are in the posture*. You do the pose from the inside out. As you practice, you ask yourself: How does this feel on the inside? How is my body

responding? You observe yourself as you practice (*svadyaya*) and make modifications as needed.

What's more, you begin to realize that the purpose of yoga is not to master a posture. It's about *using a posture to understand and transform yourself*. Postures are your tools to do that. So, if you come to class remembering that this is not about a posture, but about you and use a posture to understand how you feel and how you function, then you truly grasp the meaning of yoga.

Of course, you want to be strong and flexible—that's one of the reasons you practice, but as you get older, you want to go deeper. You want to dive beneath the surface to reflect on some of the principles that make yoga so universal and so timeless. Through studying and reflecting on these concepts, you get to know yourself in a deeper, more fundamental and spiritual way.

I've been teaching yoga to women at midlife and older since 1999. I'm open to teaching men but they haven't come to my classes, so over the years, I've shifted my attention to solely focus on women.

At the end of each of my classes, I share some of the ideas from the *Yoga Sutra* with my students and show how they are relevant to their lives today. These concepts then become the focus of the meditation that follows. We've covered the *yamas* (our attitudes toward others), the *niyamas* (our attitudes toward

ourselves), *duhkha* (emotional suffering), *avidya* (incorrect knowledge, false understanding and clouded perceptions), and many other concepts.

Tracey Fox, a 76-year-old woman who has been studying with me for about a year, spoke for many of my students when she told me recently, “You probably see me tear up during the meditation. It always brings up something for me, either during class or later in the day.” This is just one example of the subtlety and unexpected effects of yoga practice.

MY YOGA CONNECTION

The first time I did yoga I was in my early 50s. I was going through a difficult time and desperately needed something to help me cope. Everyone was talking about yoga so I decided to give it a try. I loved it from the moment I walked into my first class in a small studio in a rehabbed section of Philadelphia. Everything was completely white: the walls, flooring, pillows. Even before I started moving and breathing consciously, I felt a huge sense of relief. I had walked in uptight and edgy, not having slept the night before. When I walked out after that first class, I was in a very different place. I knew the problems were still there but somehow, they seemed more distant. Yes, they were still serious, but I had developed a calm that enabled me to handle them

better. I was able to be more thoughtful in my responses and less reactive.

From the nurturing I received and the connection I felt, I couldn't wait to go back for more classes. There was no question in my mind that yoga would be an important piece of my life from then on.

Since that first class over twenty years ago, yoga has been my daily companion. In my 2006 book, *Yoga for Women at Midlife & Beyond: A Home Companion*, I wrote: "Yoga is a homecoming: a coming home to ourselves." And that's exactly how I feel—every single day.

My yoga practice sustains me: it keeps me steady and grounded. But it's more than that too: Yoga has been my salvation when challenges arise and I need to handle *duhkha*.

A few years ago, when I was experiencing writer's block, yoga helped me return to my other "home," writing. After completing my last book, I didn't think I'd write another one. With no inspiration, my ideas had dried up and I felt that my life as a writer was over. Nonetheless, I continued to call myself a writer—even though I wasn't writing. During this period, I knew something was missing. I felt unsettled and unproductive, but I couldn't quite figure out what was going on. I took poetry classes, dabbled in book arts, and sampled the rich cultural scene in Santa

Fe, New Mexico. Although these activities were enjoyable, they didn't satisfy me on a visceral level as writing does.

Yoga was the one thing that supported me during this disconcerting period. Through doing meditation, yoga and breath work, I was able to connect to who I truly am, reflect on what I wanted to do with the rest of my life, and gain some clarity about what mattered most to me. It was through this process that I discovered a focus for my next book. I was home!

It doesn't matter whether I'm standing on one foot in Tree Pose on a mat in my own bedroom in Santa Fe or in a hotel room in St. Petersburg, Russia: Yoga transports me to a place without boundaries, a place of inner peace and calm where I feel centered and grounded. When I come off the mat, I take that feeling with me and it gives me comfort and confidence to be myself—wherever I am and whomever I'm with.

BECOMING A TEACHER

For seven or eight years, I attended class regularly and continued to love doing yoga. I always felt relaxed and clear after I left, but I had no desire to practice at home or delve any deeper into the study or philosophy of yoga. I decided to become a teacher so I could share my passion with others. A personal practice is critical in becoming a teacher, I learned on the very first day. It furthers her own growth and development.

That was all the motivation I needed. I started practicing at home every morning. Once I started, I had no problem keeping it up. I'd wash my face, brush my teeth, and throw out my mat: my morning ritual. I loved the stretching and deep breathing when I was half awake. I liked the way I felt after doing my practice—calm, centered and focused—ready to start my day. If I skipped a day, I noticed I was more reactive to people and situations that arose during the day.

The week after I finished my teacher training, a long-time teacher left the studio and I was asked to take over her class for older women. That was 1999. Two years later, we moved to Santa Fe. It took a few years to get my teaching off the ground. Initially, I taught in different venues and students came and went. But over time, I developed a core group of committed students who signed up for series after series.

YOGA AND PD

In the fall of 2016 I was diagnosed with Parkinson's Disease (PD). About six months before my diagnosis, I noticed some subtle changes. I had a tremor in my right hand that I never had before. My handwriting changed. It kept getting smaller and smaller until it was hardly legible. And I was very stiff when I woke up in the morning.

When I saw my internist, she wasn't that concerned. Even if it were PD, she said, my symptoms were so mild and it was so early that I wouldn't need medication. I decided I'd just put it out of my mind and move on with my life. Easier said than done.

Much as I'd like to report otherwise, at this point, my practice did not serve me well. The elephant in the room was just too large. Where I was usually calm and focused when I practiced, I was now agitated and scattered. I was going through the poses mechanically. My mind was all over the place. If it were PD, what would that mean for my life? What would have to change? Could I still teach? What about driving? Then, I'd switch gears—It can't be PD. It must be an essential tremor, like a friend has had for 45 years.

Then, what symptoms would I get and how would they progress? Of course, I read about Michael J. Fox, but I only knew two people personally with PD. Both had dealt with the disease for about ten years. One, in her early 80s, had no visible symptoms; the other, a few years younger, used a walker. Where would I fall in this spectrum? Please God, I bargained, just give me ten good years so I can see my four grandchildren go off to college.

I decided I needed a diagnosis to calm me down. Then I would know what I was dealing with and could focus my energy on finding treatments I was comfortable considering. When a

neurologist confirmed my diagnosis, it was still a shock although I wasn't really surprised because, as I said earlier, I was having symptoms for about six months before I was diagnosed.

But Parkinson's Disease? No one in my family had Parkinson's. Cancer, yes. Heart disease, of course. Part of me wondered, is this a mistake? But deep down, I knew it was the correct diagnosis.

From that point on, I was calm and focused as I researched the disease, explored different treatment methods, and looked for the most natural ways to treat it. My yoga practice became (and still is) an essential part of my treatment. Every morning I go in my study, throw out my yoga mat and stand, facing the rising sun, hands in prayer position, and recite the following *bhavana* (intention):

Let the healing powers of the sun wash over me and heal me, circling my heart, moving down my arms to my fingertips, down through my trunk, my legs, grounding me to the earth, and enveloping me with healing. Let these powers slow the progression of the disease, quiet my tremor, soften the stiffness and keep me healthy.

I then do my practice, which includes *asana*, *pranayama*, chanting and a short meditation—a calming foundation for starting my day, bringing me home to myself.

WHY THIS BOOK NOW?

When my previous book, *The Privilege of Aging*, came out in August 2013, I announced that this was my last book. Friends and family laughed at me because they had heard this comment before. They knew I'd write another book. But I felt differently this time: I had written nine books and that was enough. I didn't want to deal with the pressure and intensity of writing another book. I wanted to enjoy myself more and work less. After all, I was about to turn 70.

The first year after I finished *The Privilege of Aging*, I was busy traveling and promoting it. I didn't think about writing. But as the one-year mark rolled around, I started to miss writing. When I heard people talk of their creative projects, I felt envious. I wanted to create something, too. I felt like something was missing from my life, but I didn't have an idea for a book. I decided to write a memoir for my children and grandchildren. I fleshed out an outline, wrote some essays, and developed a structure. Within a year, I had completed that project. It was gratifying that my children were so appreciative and that I had created a beautiful legacy for them and my grandchildren, but it didn't satisfy me in the same way that writing a "real" book does.

I then took on the editorship of *Legacy*, the quarterly newsletter of the New Mexico Jewish Historical Society. It was challenging on many levels and very satisfying, but I wasn't

writing. As I inched toward two years as editor, I realized that something was still missing. And that “something” was writing.

Then three things happened within a month—all related to my teaching yoga. I received an email from a former student of mine who had moved to Washington state thanking me for the “gift” of yoga that I had given her when she was contemplating hip surgery. Just what was that gift?

Next, I learned that one of my current students was formerly homeless. She now has an apartment, lives on a shoestring, and has become an advocate for the homeless. What’s her story and how has yoga helped her?

Lastly, a woman called after receiving my name from a former student and told me that she wants to get back into yoga but she has fibromyalgia and arthritis, among other medical problems, and she wasn’t sure she was strong enough to handle the class. We had a long talk and I invited her to try a class and see if she liked it. If she didn’t, she didn’t have to take the series. She came to class the next day and seemed to participate comfortably. After class I asked her how it was for her. A big smile spread across her face as she said, “I feel like I’ve come home.”

Even with the scant information I had about these three women, a light went off in my head and I knew I had an idea for book #10. Their experiences told me that there must be many

more stories around that show how yoga has touched older women's lives and transformed them.

THE OLDER YOGINIS FEATURED

This book contains ten women's stories—eight individuals and a friendship that joins two women in a love of yoga. They are stories of physical and emotional healing, of adversity overcome, and of spiritual renewal. In each chapter, you'll get to know an older woman as a yogini. You'll hear her speak in her own words about how yoga has impacted on her life and how she has evolved as a result of yoga being a part of her later years. At the beginning of each chapter, her photograph in a favorite yoga pose will let you visualize her as you read. Below her photo, a quote from one of her interviews captures an important point.

Including each woman's photo was deliberate, because many older women feel invisible—their presence ignored and their words disregarded. By giving them their own chapter and photo, I hope to send a message that these women do matter. The form of their yoga pose may not be perfect, but they are doing their best. The fact that they're doing yoga in later life needs to be recognized.

You never see an older woman on the cover of *Yoga Journal*. Women on the covers are young, slim and attractive. As baby boomers age, they will identify less with the women on these

YOGINI

covers and be searching for role models who look more like them. The women in this book, none household names, can inspire and hearten.

In their own words, these ten women will tell you what makes yoga so compelling, so necessary and so gratifying as they get older. If you're not a yogini yet and you're over 60, I hope they will inspire you to try yoga, no matter what your age, your body size or shape, or your health issues. If you're already practicing yoga, reading other women's stories and struggles will encourage you to continue on this path. This is an opportunity to open your mind, body and spirit to the wonders of yoga. Let it guide you and support you in the years ahead.



“My purpose is to express joy through my art and my life.”

--Rayna Griffin

Rayna Griffin, 69: Gaining Inspiration

When Rayna Griffin attended her first yoga class at age 65, she knew she had come home. “It was so magical, I felt like crying,” she told me. “It was just what I needed for my life and my head.”

Truth be told, she had attended one other yoga class—a Hot Yoga class—15 years earlier. She didn’t realize that “hot” referred to the temperature of the room and that the thermostat was purposely set high. Rayna thought it meant the “in” thing to do. Dripping with perspiration and getting more and more uncomfortable by the minute, she finally burst out loud: “Why doesn’t someone turn on the A.C.?” The room was silent. That experience convinced Rayna that yoga was not for her. She didn’t take another class until she met her present yoga teacher, Naomi Rose (see Chapter 3 for Naomi’s story), at the post office in Sedona, Arizona two years ago. She invited Rayna to try a class.

The old adage, “When the student is ready, the teacher will appear,” certainly applied to Rayna. She was ripe for the effects of yoga. “I was dead inside for six years. I was spiraling down into a depression. I had a lot of worries about finances. My husband’s profession came to a halt,” she told me.

“I had done art my whole life but when life got crazy, nothing came to me,” she said. “I just sat there. I shut down. I went on Prozac but I still couldn’t do anything creative. Prozac stopped me from feeling like I wanted to cry all the time, even though I had a good life, a solid marriage, and a wonderful family. It somehow took away the feeling of aloneness and being lost, but I couldn’t find joy and peace in myself. Before Prozac, I wondered why I was even on this planet and what I had to offer. Over my lifetime, I

had done painting, sculpting, water colors, all kinds of art. For six years, nothing.”

Art is just one of the things that Rayna pursued in her unconventional life. In 1972 as newlyweds, she and her husband John moved to Nairobi, Kenya, and opened a “hippie craft store.” They sold pottery, leather goods, candles, clothing and local jewelry. She ran the shop while John ran the workshop that trained and employed six local Kenyans. They stayed there for six and a half years.

When they left Kenya in 1978, Rayna and John bought an RV and traveled the western states for six months with their two sons, ages one and three. In the course of their travels, they fell in love with Sedona, Arizona, and bought a house within a day. Rayna was a stay-at-home mom while the boys were young, throwing herself into community service. Among other activities, she was a Boy Scout troop leader, she started a recycling program in town, she was on a number of boards, and she taught art in several different local schools. Throughout these years, she always made art in some form and often sold her watercolors in local galleries.

The recession hit them hard in 2009 and 2010: her husband’s custom home business came to a halt when the building industry in Sedona dried up. They lost a considerable amount of money in lots they owned to build homes on. They decided they needed to

do something else for income. They heard from a friend that olive oil shops were a good investment with the growing trend in healthy eating. So, they opened a shop in Scottsdale, Arizona.

“I’m a small-town country girl. The only time we would go to the big city (Phoenix) was to go to the airport and fly somewhere,” she told me. “I had to say goodbye to several art-related boards that I was on, try to get my head around owning and running a retail shop two-plus hours away from home, and dealing with big-city life.”

They traveled each week the two and a half hours back and forth to the shop and worked three full days. She had to learn to operate a complicated cash register, integrate bookkeeping and inventory systems, and handle all personnel issues—while mastering the culture of olive oils from around the world.

“Long hours and a challenging new life for me at age 60, and both of us learning by the seat of our pants—wow! My brain was always exhausted and filled with business ideas or problems. My only creative outlet was decorating the shop for the seasons and making signs. I needed that artistic expression so badly!” she said.

“When I came back to Sedona after three days in Phoenix, I had no inspiration or energy for painting or being creative. Zero!! No time for art. My studio sat waiting for me, but I had no motivation, and nothing to express in art. I felt like a big part

of me was gone. My mind and body were always racing to catch up with housework, laundry, bills, and groceries. Then organizing items needed or placing orders for the shop.

“I felt sooo divided as a person: part of me here and part of me in retail mode. My stomach was always in a flutter and my heart and mind felt like they were always racing. And I was living with a husband who had to leave a 30-year construction career and learn retail; that was hard as well, and it affected our marriage of 40 years.”

They finally decided this was not a life style they wanted or enjoyed. John missed contracting and designing homes, and Rayna missed her studio and painting as well as community work.

It took several months to wind down after they sold the shop. She stopped taking Prozac, signed up for a sculpture class, and turned their dining room into a sculpture studio. It was around that time that she met yoga instructor Naomi Rose and went to her first yoga class.

Naomi recalls her initial impressions of Rayna: “When Rayna first came to my class, she didn't seem very comfortable in her body. She had issues with her back and not much flexibility.”

Rayna remembers what she needed at that point in her life. “I know my purpose is to express joy through my art and life. I feel I

have a new life, and a new chapter to write in the book of my life— thanks to my yoga classes that keep me balanced and thriving!”

Naomi sees very positive changes in her student as well. “She’s been with me for over a year now, coming regularly to two classes a week and also attending some of my yoga workshops. What I notice now is a grace in her body and movements she didn’t have before. Her flexibility and strength have increased. She has fewer back aches. Also, she seems to have released some emotional baggage so that she’s come to a stronger center in herself. She reports being happier now with what she’s learning from me and from yoga.”

Rayna agrees, and adds, “I find I want to send a message in my work now; before it was just using great colors, shapes, or abstract flowers and feelings with a lot of movement. My work is more spiritual now, with a message I want to share: a message of healing, uplifting, thought-provoking, that I hope, inspires well-being.”

She continues, “With my paintings my message is to bring a smile, a ‘wow’ and a sense of beauty, harmony, joy, and peace. I tend to use the *chakra* (the seven centers of spiritual power in the human body) colors which bring a sense of balance and nature as well.

“I have a different message with my sculpture. I hope that my sculptures are a reminder of the beauty and grace of our own

unique bodies. Sculptures also provoke questions for me and I hope for the people who view them: Do we take the time to honor ourselves and our bodies? And do we appreciate how yoga brings out the gift of the mind-spirit connection when we quiet ourselves into these graceful poses?”

Reflecting further, Rayna says, “Yoga really changed me. It helped me open my heart and mind and expand as a person. I like the calming effects of the loud nasal breathing that sounds like the ocean waves crashing on the shore—*ujjayi* breath.

“I am instantly transported to a deserted beach, and hearing the power and endless crashing of the waves and water, and my mind opens up to the vastness and endless beauty and strength of the ocean. It relaxes me. I forget all the trivia in my life and the world. It brings me back to myself and my body and slows me down with peace. I am digging deeper now. I’m learning, growing and discovering more about myself every day.”

Rayna also learned a lot about herself in the aftermath of her mother and older sister’s deaths. Yoga helped her accept these changes and losses. She explains, “Death, end of life challenges, life review, memories, legacies, fears, and overcoming the unknown in a foreign environment—all came to a head for me last November.”

The phone call came from a friend in Nairobi that her older sister Jan had fallen backwards down a staircase and cracked her

skull on the tile floor at the bottom. She was not found for 12 hours. Jan had been the caregiver of their frail mother for 15 years, who had died the previous July at age 90.

When Rayna's younger sister Kathy and she learned that Jan had been in a coma for a week, they flew to Nairobi, Kenya, as soon as they could but sadly learned in transit that Jan had died. Rayna and Kathy began to liquidate what they could of the 13-room house and found important paperwork to help them understand their mother's and sister's lives and finances. Many friends came to call with support and advice. They learned that both their mother and sister were very involved in many charity groups.

For three weeks, Kathy and Rayna spent ten-hour days going through the contents of the huge estate. "We made decisions left and right, all the while praying for help and guidance and hoping we could do it correctly and with honor," Rayna told me. "Friends came and took away mementos, the staff took bags of clothing, towels and food, and we donated a lot to charitable organizations they were involved with."

As a result, Kathy and Rayna became closer in ways they never expected. Each evening they'd sit down with a glass of wine and go through old photo albums and review the day's decisions. After three weeks, when their work was finished, they flew back to the United States, feeling especially grateful. "Kathy and I learned so

many lessons about our own strengths and weaknesses as sisters, as a team, and individually,” Rayna said. “We also realized the need for support of family and friends, and the importance of faith, prayer and a positive spirit.

“When I returned home,” Rayna remembers, “I felt such love, support and comfort that I was not alone and that I had my own family waiting for me: my sons, daughters-in-law and grandsons.”

The only objects Rayna wanted from her mother’s vast collection of art and artifacts were four beautifully carved statues of Buddha, which she was able to pack in her suitcases. She told me, “Having these statues in my Arizona home—so far from Nairobi and from Tibet—brings me such peace. And going to yoga class twice a week reinforces that serenity. Looking at the statues reminds me to be strong and remember that I can do more and be more than I ever thought possible. Every day, I feel gratitude and love.”



“Meditation is my way of praying and listening. The answers to our biggest problems come to us in our silence.”

--Susan Little

Lillian Weilerstein, 83: Striving for Order

“When I was younger I made a deal with the devil never to be bored, and I paid a price for it,” Lillian Weilerstein told me. “But I’m at peace with my choices now—three months from 80—and I have to give yoga credit for that peace.”

Lillian started doing yoga in her 50s when she was working as a school counselor in an inner city Philadelphia school. There were many responsibilities and stresses. A yoga class at a nearby athletic facility fit into her schedule so she started going there. She decided she wanted to be more physically active even though she says that she’s not coordinated and didn’t enjoy other physical activities. Yet when she attended yoga class, something different happened: it felt good. This was a new feeling for her.

Lillian was not an athletic kid and wasn’t good at sports, but today she feels she’s one of the strongest women her age and has more energy than most of her peers. She believes that physical advantage is due to yoga.

When she first started going to class, she took three classes a week, then it narrowed down to two. Now she attends a chair yoga class once a week since the gentle yoga class she enjoyed was discontinued. She also goes to Pilates class once a week and

walks. One of her first yoga teachers encouraged her to push beyond her comfort point. She thinks that's what has contributed to her strength today. "I always thought I couldn't do it. She said, 'Yes, you can.' That had a long range influence on my thinking," she believes. "I heard 'Try harder' and 'Put more effort into each position.' And I did."

And yet, she says, "I never did a handstand. You make your choices. You don't worry about what someone else is doing." This was just the approach she needed: to simply focus on *how* you're doing and *what* you're doing and not criticize or compare. When she was younger, she was more self-conscious. After she turned 80, she says, "I don't care what everyone thinks."

I interviewed Lillian several times over the phone since she lives in the Philadelphia suburbs and I'm in the southwest. A mutual friend introduced us. When she heard about my new book, she said, "You must talk to my friend Lillian." It turns out that Lillian worked at the same school as my late sister-in-law, who did educational evaluations for children with learning problems there, so we had another connection beyond yoga.

Yoga has helped Lillian cope with emotional issues as well. Her mother died when she was 50, and two years later, her father died. Her three sons had become independent. It was a time of

transition. Yoga helped facilitate her moving on to another phase of her life.

“Yoga helped me deal with life changes,” she told me. “I was ready for it. I had a need for something for myself as opposed to satisfying other people’s needs of what I should do or be.”

When she retired from her work as a counselor at age 60 and began working part-time as a nursery school counselor-supervisor, yoga smoothed the transition. She recently retired from her second career and has more time to plan her own activities now.

Lillian reflects on the changes she’s observed in herself and in her relationship to yoga. “Once I hit 75 I realized that when I was younger I loved chaos, and now I love order. My training in counseling psychology made me aware of styles of learning and their impact on the individual. My learning style is mildly distracted. I am quick, which can become careless, and resourceful. As a result, I must learn how to live with my personality and I have come to like that, being quick and resourceful. I enjoyed the challenge of working with many different children, parents and teachers. I learned that problems can never be fully solved but can be worked on. It was an interesting time. I was never bored. I don’t get bored and if I do, I do breathing exercises. I recognize the need to focus as part of survival in old age. Yoga teaches focus.

“My memory was always scattered though I could compensate. But I realized before I retired as a school counselor that I didn’t enjoy multi-tasking any more. I wasn’t as fast as I had been. Around that time, I started to do yoga. Being present is a part of yoga. I’ve tried to consciously incorporate it into my everyday life. I focus or try to be present in the moment: this mind and this body are important. I always believed that, even before I was involved in yoga. Yoga is a disciplined way of incorporating mind and body and helps me work toward order.

“We’re all born with different temperaments. Being present with one thing is not easy for me to do. I always carry something to read. Yesterday I was on the train with nothing to read and was trying to ‘be’ in the place. I was quickly distracted by the view and the people. But I wasn’t anxious about it. I do feel that’s a temperamental thing and for me, necessary.

“To be mindful is part of yoga. During yoga I have to be aware of keeping my thoughts from moving around. It’s becoming easier to do because mindfulness is a way of handling anxiety, and a goal,” she told me.

For Lillian, mindfulness involves using the breathing techniques she learned in yoga class. These have been very important to her and she uses them in different forms to suit her purpose outside of class. The breath has helped her deal with simple frustrations, such as being stuck in traffic, and cope with

more serious, complicated anxiety, such as during radiation following breast surgery. She's also been able to shift her chattering thoughts to more calming ones when she can't fall asleep at night.

Now, at 83, she is trying to be an orderly, disciplined person. "I have no pets but I love gardening. When the season ends, I try to make my house my pet. I take this concept of order from yoga: focusing on what needs to be done. Letting go is part of the way I think. Keeping it orderly and aesthetically pleasing is important—putting and throwing things away. Everything has its place. Moving from chaos into order."

Lillian then shifts to explain how yoga is tied to the aesthetic for her and what that means. She told me that art, music, and literature are even more important to her than yoga, but yoga itself has an aesthetic aspect for her. What she has gained from yoga has helped her to appreciate the aesthetic more. She explains:

"Whether you're looking at a painting or listening to music, if you stay with what you're involved with and have fewer distractions, you enjoy it in greater depth. I've read forever and ever with total concentration. I'm not distracted by people or pulled away by activities in the room. Yoga teaches us to be mindful and focus, so when you're looking at a painting, you're focused on that painting; you're not distracted. You're focused on

only one thing. Then my enjoyment of painting or sculpture becomes part of the response to what I see and how I respond to them.

“If I had to give up reading and music, I don’t know what I’d do. I couldn’t live without good books to read. I also do pottery. I’m not talented but when I do pottery, I bring the mindfulness and focus of yoga to my pottery.

“My husband was very focused but he had a stroke a few years ago, and now that he has to think about focusing, he’s more conscious. Things he did automatically before now he has to focus on. A friend told him, ‘Now you know what normal people are like.’”

Of course, changes like this occur whether or not you practice yoga. Last summer Lillian was over-zealous gardening and experienced several months of back and leg pain. Her physical therapist suggested that yoga helped her realize sooner that she had arthritis and stenosis. Also thanks to yoga, she was able to be disciplined and conscious during the physical therapy exercises and is now back in yoga class.

Lillian recently celebrated her 83rd birthday. The way in which she celebrated it says a lot about how she feels about aging. Rather than wait for someone else to suggest a party or a special meal, she decided to take the situation into her own hands and

create the birthday celebration she wanted. “What I like about aging is I give myself permission to choose what I choose to do,” she says. This year her synagogue was having a big fundraising luncheon around the time of her birthday. She bought a table for her family and ten orchid center pieces at the end of the event. “I celebrated my day by giving: I gave an orchid to each family member. There was nothing I needed or wanted other than to be with the people I cared most about.”

This birthday has been the catalyst for her reflecting on aging and how yogic concepts have helped her accept the changes and losses it brings. “The concept of letting go is most important in this phase of my life,” she says. “I try to let go and be relaxed in *savasana*. When I’m aware I’m tensing up, I focus on the breath. That’s just part of what I do. I use it to get myself started in the morning and to help me fall asleep at night.”

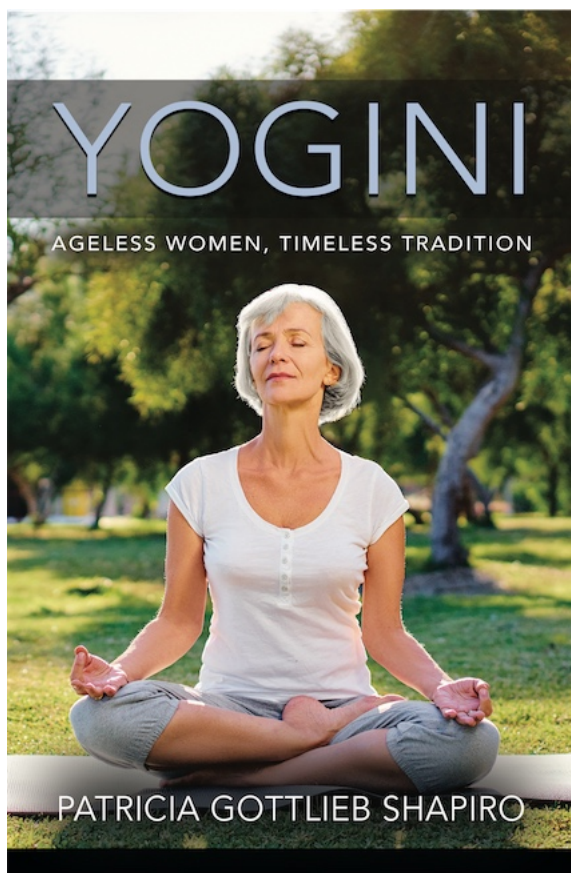
As you would expect, quite a few of her close friends have died. At the death of each one, she experienced a period of mourning and then letting go—of expectations to visit, to talk, to commiserate. “The only compensation are the memories,” she says, sadly. “The feeling of loss is always there. If there were issues, they are forgotten.”

She recognizes that there is a lot of giving up and letting go that comes with aging. When she takes a walk, she’s always on the lookout for a bench so she can rest. She must also be conscious of

her balance so she doesn't fall. Walking on ice, as she has this winter, has been very stressful and requires constant vigilance. These are a couple of the small ways in which she has had to heighten her sense of paying attention.

Lillian shifts back to reflecting on how doing yoga for the last 25 years has enhanced her own growth as a woman. She's says she's always been mindful: "I stop and see what's around me. I probe another layer of consciousness." And of course, yoga has helped her be more mindful. She told me, "Yoga is a part of my life. It is who I am and how I became who I am. We live such a long time today, so we should live it well. I would not stop yoga no matter what. It means a lot to me."

And yet, she continues, "I have a long way to go before I consider myself a peaceful person. But on this last vacation, the sunsets were magnificent. And I was able to capture that moment. I was able to sit and watch the sun set for a long period. That's progress!"



YOGINI is the first book to explore what yoga means to older women through the personal stories of ten women, who range in age from 63 to 85. Their fascinating experiences reveal why yoga is so compelling, so necessary and so gratifying as they get older. And how they evolve in mind, body and spirit at an age most believe they are done growing.

YOGINI:

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