

# The Forced Retreat

May 21, 2007 by [lifeshifting](#)

Well, well, where have I been? Let me start off by apologizing for my disappearing act. Having heard from some of my loyal readers that I was missed (ok, both of them...), I do want you to know that I was not off on a safari in Africa or lying on a beach in Hawaii (except in my dreams!). Truth be told, I was experiencing first hand what I would call a “micro-blast” (kind of like when a mini-tornado cuts through your tranquil neighborhood) of upheaval that dropped me head first (or to be anatomically accurate: back first) into the third stage of the Life-Shifting cycle of self renewal: The Retreat.

So, yes, I have been “away” on a retreat of sorts, only recently returning to the full-time ambulatory world of work, play, bill-paying, and semi-regularly, writing. Here’s what happened. Despite my pride in being a fairly flexible, agile, yoga practitioner, I do have a history of severe back pain. Pain, which, whenever it surfaces from down deep in that mysterious place referred to as “the tailbone” (yes, we upright monkeys still have tails...of bone no less!) it invariably signals that change is afoot. Of course, what it really signals is that I have ignored other more benign signals for too long, and that a forced retreat is in order. In any case, this time around, the first in many years I’m grateful to say, the blitzkrieg arrived in a moment of supreme normalcy: while vacuuming.

In my yoga class the night before this incident, I folded over backwards and read the clock on the wall upside down with grace and aplomb. Less than 15 hours later, while momentarily lifting a rather bulky swivel chair in order to reach those tenacious cat hairs that wedge their way under the legs, I felt the crunch. In that moment, I knew that something was amiss, kind of like the realization that you’ve stood up way too fast, or bent a bit too far to the right or left. No big deal. Until the next morning, when I couldn’t move! Unable to bend or lift my body without excruciating pain shooting through my entire body, I was pretty shocked. Over the next couple of days, in the tried and true tradition of The Great Denial, I fought tooth and nail to go through my day with some semblance of normalcy.

As long as I didn’t move AT ALL, I was fine. BUT, unless you happen to be a slug, life’s normal trajectory doesn’t allow most of us to get much accomplished without moving. Hence, by the second afternoon of refusing to slow down, cancel clients, or otherwise pay attention to my poor body, the cry for attention from my lower extremity became impossible to ignore. It was only when I found myself crawling to the bathroom on my hands and knees after an excruciating session with a client (who was in far less pain than me), that I surrendered...and reluctantly, entered The Retreat.

The good news is that once I propped myself comfortably up on pillows, pulled my journal and a few good books off the shelf and cancelled the following day of client sessions, I relaxed. I woke up to WHAT WAS ACTUALLY HAPPENING: I was being asked by my body to stop. To listen. To pay attention. To go inside. And so I did. Of course, the minute that I succumbed to the truth and made the decision to retreat, relax,

and convalesce, I felt better. Many of you by now may be sneering and wondering: where were the doctors, the chiropractors, and the meds? Never fear, I availed myself of all of the above. But, even though these palliative acts did ease the initial symptoms, the deeper process is what really counts. My body was sending me a message: it was time for a break.

It took about a week of full-time rest before the pain receded and the flow of vitality and life energy returned. Having in the past been brought to my knees (literally and metaphorically) for many weeks, even months, by past bouts with lower back pain, I am very grateful to my body for this speedy recovery. I'm quite convinced that my regular yoga, diet and exercise practices are mostly responsible for the short duration of The Retreat this time around, but I'm also supremely aware that the key likely lies in heart and soul, not body or mind. Once I realized what was happening, I hunkered down and took the work of retreating very seriously. I spent a great deal of time meditating, writing in my journal, and reflecting on the bigger questions: Where in my life was I in a rut? What wanted to be released? Is there an old "story" that no longer serves me that needs to be revised?

In a future blog I may share some of the still percolating answers that emerged. But for now, I just want to share the most profound realization of the experience: Just like vacations, sick-days, and occasional flights of fancy, retreat is necessary, for the body, yes, but mostly for the soul. Too often, for reasons imposed on us by cultural and economic expectations, we avoid or put off taking the all-important retreat until we are forced to do so by that most valuable instrument of truth: our body. Yet, what if we became more aware of the cycles of change and renewal that are always in process in our lives, and recognized that an occasional retreat from the world of work, responsibilities, even relationships, is a necessary part of the cycle? My sense is that some of the six month or year long retreats (a.k.a. breakdowns!) that we wind up taking due to severe illness or exhaustion might be avoided. Think about it. When was the last time you took time away from the stresses and strains of your family, work or career? Does going on a retreat, even for a few days, or a week, even seem possible?

Here's the rub: if at all possible, heed the call before you're forced to. When you feel like "taking a break" from the world, even if just for a day or two, DO IT! And if you're not sure what to do with this special time, here's the formula that I follow:

1. Create a space for solitude;
2. Spend time in nature;
3. Don't be afraid to do nothing;
4. Reflect, write, and/or meditate;
5. Ask yourself big questions (If you're not sure what they are ask, "What are they?")
6. Don't be anxious about "getting the answer"—just try to BE with the questions
7. Pay attention to your dreams
8. When anxious or fearful: breathe deeply, stay present, and let it be
9. If all of the above seems impossible: ask for help (e.g. therapist, friend, coach, etc.)
10. Trust

In closing, I want to thank Ellen DeGeneres for making me aware of just how difficult it is for people in our productivity-obsessed culture to take a break. During the height of my hiatus from the world, I just happened to turn on the TV (I needed a break from the work of my break) and catch Ellen's talk show. Lo and behold, there she was broadcasting her usual line-up of stand-up and guest interviews, but she was not standing up, she was propped up, on stage, in a bed, cut down by severe lower back pain. BUT, she wasn't going to let a little back ache stop her from being a workaholic. Oh no, not Ellen. So with a brandish of bravado and a cultural slap at any loser like me who actually listens to his body and STOPS when in pain, she just kept on rolling. Joking about dancing with twin partners, Percodan and Percoset (seems she's totally open-minded when it comes to pain-killers), Ellen proceeded to guilt the rest of us would be retreaters. So to Ellen, whom I still love, I say, "Shame on you. Next time, stay home!"

Of all the things that I ask my clients to do, "retreating" is usually the most challenging. We are such a "doing" society, and retreating is all about "being." Sometimes you may even have to trick yourself into taking a mini-retreat by creating situations where you have to do nothing for long stretches of time (ever wonder why more executives don't complain that much about international travel?)...whatever it takes, be gentle with yourself. **It takes a lifetime to learn to do nothing.** I know. I'm still a novice.

Cheers!