Lamira Martin was flipping through a copy of *Utne Reader* a few years ago when she stumbled on an advertisement that made her pause. The ad described an organization called Celebrant USA, which trains people to become nondenominational officiants who preside at events that mark life’s passages: weddings, funerals, and even business occasions like opening a new office.

Martin was intrigued. “Years ago, I got my undergraduate degree in anthropology,” explains Martin, who is the business circulation director at a St. Louis library. “I’m not religious at all, but I’m interested in spirituality and in looking at different cultures.” She liked the notion of ceremonies that help people navigate and honor the major changes in their lives.
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So she signed up for Celebrant USA’s online course (www.celebrantusa.com). She logged on every week to a live chatroom, where she learned about various traditions and discussed assignments. At the end of six months, she graduated, became ordained, and started officiating at weddings and commitment ceremonies.

Martin is one of millions of people whose thirst for knowledge and meaning inspires them to pursue lifelong learning opportunities. As baby boomers enter their retirement years, the number of Americans 65 and older is expected to double by 2030—and few of them will be content to sit in the garage listening to baseball games. Instead, they’re engaging their minds and spirits in a lively quest for learning.

The range of offerings available to them continues to increase. Traditional “continuing education” courses that most universities and colleges provide are popular, but many people, like Lamira Martin, are stepping off the beaten path in search of enrichment, from inexpensive, self-directed online courses to educational cruises on luxury ocean liners.
Celebrant USA is a good example of alternative lifelong learning. Charlotte Eulette, one of the founders of the organization and now its North American director, explains that she and her partner brought the idea to the United States from Australia after the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. After 9/11, Eulette says, she began questioning “the exclusiveness of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness. We felt we needed to do something for humanity.”

The first classes took four people through the college-level material, which covers traditional ceremonies, ethnography and anthropology, and thinkers like Joseph Campbell and Carl Jung who have studied the function of ritual. Since that first class, some 300 people have graduated.

“A lot of our graduates feel that they were celebrants all along,” she says. They were always the ones who spoke at funerals and weddings. They were innately ritual makers.” Beyond any individual ceremony at which the celebrants officiate, their broader function is “bringing the community together,” Eulette adds.

If celebrants are seekers who turn their journey into community service, the seekers who turn to the organization Spirituality and Practice (www.spiritualityandpractice.com) are often on a more private path. Spirituality and Practice is a broad organization run by Frederic and Mary Ann Brussat, and at its center is a remarkable website that, as Mary Ann Brussat puts it, “provides a multifaith resource for anyone on a spiritual journey.”

The website reflects the couple’s 30 years of work in the realm of spirituality and culture. Together, they have reviewed through the lens of spirituality more than 7,500 books,

Celebrant Wilma Quantrille officiates at a commitment ceremony at the Collingswood Grand Theater and Ballroom in New Jersey.
movies, and other media. Through this work, they have identified 37 “essential spiritual practices”—like silence, faith, and peace—and the website and courses are structured around these practices, with links to books, movies, quotations, activities, writing exercises, and spiritual teachers to enhance the users’ experience of each practice. “It’s more than just an information site,” Brussat explains. “It’s really a whole learning experience focused on how to actually do these practices.”

At the heart of Spirituality and Practice’s offerings is an e-course series on topics like “spiritual practice with children.” Every day for 40 days, students receive an e-mail with a short quote and suggestions for a daily practice. There’s also a self-directed version. Students can participate in a private online discussion circle, and the conversation is sometimes intense. “People were very open and transparent. It added a lot to the experience,” Brussat says.

The offerings are intentionally priced at a remarkably affordable rate of $15 to $20 a course. “Most of us don’t have the extra time and money for a weekend retreat, and we’re trying to address that issue,” Brussat says. “We offer substantive material and a variety of teachers with the accessibility of a simple, daily exercise in your in-box.”

Celebrant USA and Spirituality and Practice demonstrate the creative approaches and unique subjects that exist in the world of lifelong learning. They also illustrate the role that technology has played in the explosion in continuing education.

Walden University is another example. Based in Minneapolis, Minnesota, Walden is a pioneer in distance learning. Since its founding in 1970, the institution has conferred more than 14,000 degrees, with a
focus on curriculum for working professionals.

It’s also been a leader in online education. Since 1994, when it first supplied e-mail to students, Walden has launched several notable firsts: the first completely online master’s degree in education in 1995, and the first web-based Ph.D. program in professional psychology in 1997. In a 1999 review of online schools, Fast Company gave its only A grade to Walden.

But Walden, as its name implies, has another core purpose. From its inception, the university has been dedicated to social change—it’s a goal that is written into the institution’s mission statement that “knowledge is most valuable when put to use for the greater good.” Graduates “share a common desire to have a positive social impact,” says Walden president Paula E. Peinovich, “and to improve the human condition.”

The university sponsors the respected Journal of Social Change, and in recent years, its most visible contribution is an international conference, now in its third year, dedicated to social change. This year’s conference, “Sustainability and Social Change,” takes place July 19 and 20 in Minneapolis. Robert F. Kennedy Jr. is the keynote speaker.

Lamira Martin says her life has been changed by her new vocation. She’s

—I wasn’t searching for a second career; the career came and found me.”
—Lamira Martin

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led several couples through marriage, including one tiki-bar ceremony where the bride and groom dressed as pirates, as well as more traditional ceremonies rooted in various cultural traditions. “I’m just loving it,” she says.

Like many seekers who find their way to organizations like Celebrant USA, Martin recognizes a certain inevitability, now that she’s made the journey. “I wasn’t searching for a second career; the career came and found me,” she says.

Whether the quest for knowledge leads to a new career, a new spiritual path, or renewed energy for a project or a profession, the process seems to inspire a dramatic sense of life purpose and connection to the wider world.
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