

Sage-ing: Finding Meaning in the Second Half of Life

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July 20, 2012

For many people, the second half of life is a time of great happiness and satisfaction. At 71, I truly feel happier today than at any earlier time of my life. How can that be, given that we are coming closer to our life's end? Sage-ing, a way of living more fully and more joyously in the second half of life, can help us to understand this paradox. Let's explore this in more detail.

Over the past century, life expectancy in North America has increased by about 30 years, from 47 years in 1900 to 77 years in 2000. Now, most people live well into retirement, providing both challenges and opportunities for living meaningfully in their later years.

Social scientists now report that our goals for living well change as we approach our later years. An earlier focus on raising a family and "getting ahead" in the work world begins to have less relevance, and we find ourselves asking different questions: What will my life be like as I age? What's next for me? What will happen at the end of my life? What legacy will I leave behind? The transition from an active work life to a yet-to-be-defined future after retirement is one that challenges many people. Since our increased longevity is a relatively new phenomenon, we have until recently had few models of what our later years should, or could, look like.

Challenges and Opportunities: Living into our 60's and beyond presents many challenges, as our bodies age, our financial resources may diminish, and our friends and family seem to dwindle. It may not be in our power to avoid some of these challenges. However, we do have control over how we respond to them. One person recovering from cancer may give up on life, assuming that they are destined to die soon. Another person says that cancer is the best thing that ever happened to them, because it taught them how precious life is. Who is living their life more fully?

Likewise, we may find that new opportunities present themselves at this time. We probably have more available time than before, and perhaps more resources as well. We likely still have the energy to explore some new directions, if we can decide what these might be. Of course, we could (and many do) choose to spend much of our time in relatively non-productive activities such as watching television, shopping or playing video games. Alternatively, we could devote our time to more productive and fulfilling activities, as outlined below. The important thing is that it's our choice to use our time the way we would like to.

Finding Meaning: In his Purpose workshops, Richard Leider often asks what it is that makes us want to get up in the morning. Pursuing the answer to that question may help us to decide how we want to live the second half of our lives. One thing that seems fairly clear is that our egos drive our actions in the first half of our lives, while ego gratification plays less of a role in our later years. Broadly speaking, as we mature, we become more concerned with making meaning in our lives, and living more spiritually. Spirituality and meaning-making are closely related, both being involved with our relationships—with ourselves, with something/someone

bigger than ourselves, with other living beings, with the earth we live on, and with the broader universe. Whether we follow a religious tradition or not, we all have a spark of the divine within that helps define our spiritual nature and invites our connection with others.

Elements of a Life with Meaning: Each person must find their own path to a meaningful life. Here are some of the elements that I have found important in my sage-ing journey:

Learning—We learn throughout our lives. Learning has been one of the great joys of my later years, and it helps keep me young. We learn through reading, through deep conversations, through travel, through teaching and countless other ways. Keep your eyes open and you will doubtless learn something new and interesting every day!

Community—Humans are social animals. We thrive in community, and lose vitality when we no longer feel a part of a social group. Whether it's with our family or good friends, it's vital that we maintain our connections with others. This becomes harder when we get older, as friends and family may move away, change interests or die. So we have to put conscious effort into creating new communities, new connections and new friends. My wife Charlotte and I have made a special effort to continue to develop new relationships over the years, and this has served us well.

Spirituality—As we get older, many of us find a renewed, or even new, interest in the great questions—who am I, why am I here, what is the meaning of my life, of all life? Just paying attention in the second half of life encourages us to confront and challenge these questions and countless others, as well as to live in ways that make our lives worthwhile and benefit others and the precious earth we live on. As a person for whom conventional religious beliefs are not very relevant, I find my spiritual nature and my feeling of connection with my world makes me feel more complete and often brings me great joy.

Service—Many of us find the second half of life is an important time to give back. We have received much help from others in our early years, and now is our opportunity to return the favor and to make a difference for others. There are countless opportunities for service, and we older adults provide the volunteer support that keeps many non-profits going. Of course, as we serve others we benefit ourselves as well—and it just feels good! During my volunteer service with hospice over the past 10 years, I have helped many patients and their families as they go through this difficult time. The work has been very fulfilling and has helped me to better understand and prepare for my own mortality.

Passions—What is it that you were passionate about as a young person, but then never found the time to pursue? Now you have the time and the opportunity to renew that passion. Or perhaps as you approach your later years, you will identify a new interest that you would like to explore. Whether it be art or music, sports or travel, dancing, learning a new language, or a hundred other interests, this is the time to identify and follow your passion, your bliss. If not now, when? I took up studio pottery seriously when I retired from a scientific career fifteen years ago, and created a very enjoyable, completely different and relatively profitable second career. I am also now working on my golf game—a great challenge, an opportunity to enjoy the friendship of my golfing buddies and a chance to spend time in the outdoors.

Legacy—We would all like to leave this world a better place and be remembered for our good works. Our legacy can take many forms, including mentoring our children, grandchildren, colleagues or other younger persons; using our financial resources to support causes we believe

in; working for social justice, human rights, peace and other important causes in our communities or the world; just being a good friend to others; and so many other ways. Besides my wonderful family, my sage-ing work will be one of the legacies I hope to leave behind.

Fun—We need to have a balance in our lives between doing good works and enjoying ourselves. Life without play can be a bit too serious, in the same way that life without meaningful activities can be boring. So enjoy life and have fun, but keep it in balance. Charlotte and I really enjoy travel, which is fun and at the same time connects us with several other elements of a life with meaning—learning, community, spirituality and passions.

Conclusion: Each of us is a unique individual, and you may find the areas above interesting to different degrees. You will also find that many of the elements overlap for you to a greater or lesser extent. Part of the challenge of living well in the second half of life is to take as much time as necessary to identify and explore your own interests. There is no hurry. You have the rest of your life to create your perfect life. What an exciting prospect! Say Yes!! to life!