



BY THE AUTHORS OF THE BESTSELLING BOOKS

Repacking Your Bags and *Whistle While You Work*

RICHARD J. LEIDER
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claiming
your place
at the fire

LIVING THE SECOND
HALF OF YOUR LIFE
ON PURPOSE

An Excerpt From

***Claiming Your Place at the Fire:
Living the Second Half of Your Life on Purpose***

by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro
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Chapter 1



The Flame of Identity

Recalling Our Stories

New Elder

Richard Strozzi Heckler



At an age when most of his contemporaries were wondering what to do with themselves after retirement, Richard Strozzi Heckler embarked on a new and exciting journey uncommon to men at any stage of life.

The words of the Swiss psychoanalyst Carl Jung seemed to have been written just for him: “Wholly unprepared, we embark upon the second half of life . . . we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false assumption that our truths and ideals will serve us as before. But we cannot live the afternoons of life according to the program of life’s morning—for what was great in the morning will be little in the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.”

We cannot tell if we have entered the second half of life solely by counting the candles on our birthday cake. We do not really step into the afternoon of life just

because we reach a certain age. To know where we are in the process of becoming a new elder, we must learn to look inside.

When Richard Strozzi Heckler looked inside at age 59, he discovered that living in his 60th year was a time of transformation—a time of spiritual awakening. Instead of answers, he was left with questions: “What exactly does it mean to be an elder? How do elders grow? How is the process the same or different for everyone? Who are the new elders?”

Just as predicted by Jung, Richard had noticed a shift within himself. Noon had passed. He had entered a different part of the day, about which he knew very little. But he was aware of crossing a threshold; he was aware that this was a new stage in his journey.

Many older adults pretend that the second half of life is no different than the first. Billions of dollars are spent by millions of people trying to avoid the inevitable changes that attend the advancing years. Jung wrote that such a person “must pay with damages to his soul.” Whether we enter the second half of life on purpose with our eyes open, or against our will with our eyes shut, enter we will.

Richard Strozzi Heckler is entering the second half of life with his eyes wide open. He says, “It’s an internal thing, definitely! It’s clear I am my own obstacle. To be free in the second half means to release those internal mechanisms that hold me. Freedom now feels much more like extension, engagement, striding into an open field.”

Richard is the founder and president of the Strozzi Institute, an organization dedicated to exploring the fron-

tiers of somatic (mind-body) learning and living. Combining a Ph.D. in clinical psychology with a 30-year history as a student and teacher of the martial art aikido, Richard still glows when he discusses his love for teaching—particularly the teaching of young people.

“When I’m teaching younger people, I wake up with a warmth and a fire in my chest that gets me going. I wake up and see a wreath of color—I’ve been given another day to serve. I hold a genuine feeling of possibility, that there’s something out there today that will allow me to help them advance their dreams.”

Richard, like many of the new elders we interviewed, has a life that represents an exception to the traditional model of aging in our culture. We spoke with him early one morning while he was making breakfast for a 6-year-old child—his son, not his grandson. At an age when most people his age are launching their children into the world, Richard finds himself in a welcoming space with a second family and three young kids. For Richard, finding purpose in the second half of life involved marrying and starting a whole new family.

“Our world is so open,” Richard claims. “There are more options than ever before—more lifestyles and workstyles available. I have choices before me at any given moment to put the best part of myself forward.”

In addition to his family, Richard feels the fullest expression of himself emerges through his work. “If I sold my business,” he admits, “it would be like selling myself.”

Reflecting on what qualities he would look for in a wise elder, Richard names his friend and colleague,

George Leonard. At age 80, George is “still future-looking. He sees the horizon. And he’s a stand against ageism!”

According to Richard, “wise elders like George are patient—patient in the sense of having the long and panoramic view. Not just that someone takes time, but that their patience comes from a deep and wide perspective on life. Wisdom is the intelligence and generativity that is beyond the self. Over three billion years of evolution is evident in wise elders. They know how to tap into that and show others how they can tap into it.”

Adult life increasingly develops to different rhythms. Some people begin new careers when others their age are concluding their final ones. Some start families at a time others are facing the “empty nest.” In this era of choices, new twists and turns are the normal ingredients of growing older. We are free to experiment with new ways to live and work in the second half of life. Some are training for triathalons at 65, while others are headed for rocking chairs. Who would have thought, for instance, that a 77-year-old former astronaut named John Glenn would take another journey into outer space?

The passage that Richard is exploring in his 60th year is not merely a shift from one chronological age to another. As Joseph Campbell put it so well: “The call rings up the curtain, always on a mystery of transformation. The familiar life horizon has been outgrown; the old concepts, ideals and emotional patterns no longer fit; the time for passing the threshold is at hand.” Richard Strozzi Heckler is showing us the way across that threshold into a deeper dimension of ourselves.

To age successfully, we must do more than keep fit and stay healthy physically. Like Richard Strozzi Heckler, and George Leonard, we need to stay mentally and emotionally healthy as well by initiating growth to a new level. To do that, we need to deconstruct and reconstruct our stories—we need to pursue self-understanding by poring over the pages of life we have written and making sense of them in context of the chapters now unfolding. Too many people live their lives as a short story that warrants no revision. They live fully for only a short time and extend the dying process far too long. New elders point to an alternative. They show us how the second half of the story can be as vital and compelling as the first.



Rewriting the Story for Our Second Half

To set a path for the second half of our lives, we have to know where we've come from in the first half. "Life can only be understood backwards," wrote Danish philosopher Søren Kierkegaard, "but it must be lived forwards."

At any stage of life, we can review where we've come from and take stock of our lives. But mid-life is a time when it may be possible to recover the life we have lost in living. The inward journey involves the return to our place of origin. Or, to paraphrase T. S. Eliot in "Little Giddings," the end of our explorations "will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time."

The process of recalling our stories is one of the critical

steps toward vital aging. It is never too late to begin to know oneself for the first time. The extent of our earlier inability or refusal to honor our stories will determine how long it will take to recover the life lost in living.

Most of us have been too busy writing the story of our life in the first half to be able to read it. Attention to our own stories is partly forced on us by the circumstances in the second half of life. Our children mature and move out, our colleagues retire and move on, our parents and friends grow old and pass away—all of these events focus our minds on who we are, how we've gotten here, and where we're going.

However successfully we've managed to deny death, changes in our bodies make an awareness of it impossible to ignore. Indicators as commonplace as graying hair and slower recovery from injury expose a new—or at least long-neglected—understanding of what it means to live and to die.

With this understanding comes an opportunity to draw and communicate great wisdom from the life we have led, through the recollection and retelling of our life's stories. Of course, many people are reluctant to share those stories. Usually, this is because they feel there isn't much to tell or because they fear revealing secrets. Yet, it is commonplace that from the most ordinary lives often come some of the most extraordinary tales.

Recalling our stories moves us forward and frees us from the wounds of the past by helping us to put our lives in context. Taking stock of the first half of life is a step toward being freer to live the second half with greater vitality. The events of the first half forced us to pay attention to the “doing” of them; we spent more time making things than making sense of them. But there is something about systematically recalling our sto-

ries that accelerates the growth process and puts us in a more solid position to move forward creatively.

As we tell our own stories, a new relationship with the world emerges. We move from an emphasis on external matters to a focus on inward feelings, replacing a feeling of outward obligation with a renewed sense of personal purpose. The inward look transforms the outward journey.

Paradoxically, by becoming better acquainted with our own story, we more fully understand the stories of others. We are freed from the perspective of seeing all reality as revolving around ourselves. We continue to be important, but what's around us—individuals, society, all of nature—takes on new significance. We often move from an egocentric view of reality to one that is more universal.

Increased attention to one's own story carries with it a deeper appreciation for the stories of others. Recalling and affirming our own story frees us from the wounds and despair so evident in many older people. Recalling our own story uncovers feelings of kinship with people with whom we have shared times and places. Doing so enables us to rediscover and respect a new and potentially more purposeful way of relating to the world—both within and around us.

Nobody is beyond growth. No person ever reaches a stage where further development is either inappropriate or unwarranted. We all need—and whether we know it or not, want—to keep growing. Of course, there are times when staying on a plateau is legitimate and times when, for good reasons, we hold back from advancing, but overall, there is no denying the truth: We either continue to grow or we begin to die. Recalling our stories is an antidote to such stagnation and a catalyst to growth.

Finishing Our Lives

For many people today, retirement is a roleless role. This is true in large part because the traditional notion of retirement fits with a worn-out notion of aging that conceives of it primarily in terms of disengagement and decline. Today, though, many of us are asking “How appropriate is retirement for a vital person with 30 or more years left to live?” Retirement, as it has been conceived for the past 100 years or so, can turn purposeful lives into casualties.

The traditional story of retirement will no longer be relevant to a growing number of people in the second half of life. It is time to retire that conception of retirement.

James Hillman, in his book, *The Force of Character*, talks about the “finish” of our lives in a way that distinguishes “finish” from “end.” Finishing our lives, says Hillman, is better understood as “putting a finish” on our lives—that is, burnish our character to a high gloss. Hillman makes the natural connections between finishing our lives and distinguishing the legacy we leave. Both require us to develop the most authentic expression of who we are to claim our place at the fire.

Recalling our story is essential to the challenge and privilege of finishing well in life. The true expression of our life’s purpose is as vital to our ending as to our beginning. Heeding our call keeps us journeying on purpose—and thus growing and evolving to the very end of our lives. We may retire from our jobs, but there is no relaxing from our individual callings. Calling not only precedes career but outlasts it as well. Callings never end when careers do. We may at times be unemployed or retired, but no one ever becomes uncalled. Our vocational story unfolds from cradle to grave.

Betty Friedan, in her book *The Fountain of Age*, gives a fascinating account of her research into the aging process. One breakthrough insight is that “being old is not the same as acting old.” She concludes that the mind plays an essential role, along with the body, in how we age. Our stories determine whether we are growing and heeding our calling or declining and decaying. And according to her research, the almost universally held story for aging is a period of decline. As Friedan observes, “Myth has replaced reality.”

We have all seen people who are aging well. Actor-director Clint Eastwood, at age 73, talks fondly about being on the “back nine” of life. Author Jane Juska, in her best-seller *A Round-Heeled Woman: My Late-Life Adventures in Sex and Romance*, tells the story of what happened after she took out an advertisement in the *New York Review of Books* that said: “Before I turn 67—next March—I would like to have a lot of sex with a man I like.”

These are obviously not 21-year-olds, but they have the curiosity and hunger for the life experience of a young person. These are people who heed their callings from cradle to grave. These are people who refuse to see themselves as “senior citizens.” These are new elders like Vivian Marsh.

New Elder
Vivian Marsh



Vivian Marsh’s transition to a more purposeful second half of life happened almost by accident. “And that in itself represents a pretty huge transition,” she tells us, “for most of my

life I've not been someone who does things unless they're very clearly planned out. My friend Charlotte tells me that this is because I'm a double Virgo—I don't know about that—but I do know that my entire career was built upon organization and preparation. So, it's a been a great adventure to have this new phase of my life more or less emerge by itself, without my having decided beforehand how it would look."

It makes perfect sense that Vivian should have emphasized organization and preparation in the first half of her life. Pursuing a Ph.D. in electrical engineering and earning tenured professorship at a major research university—the only woman in her department and one of only a handful in her field—doesn't happen without a lot of planning . . . at least for Vivian it didn't. "I was always interested in numbers, even when I was little. When I was in high school, I took all the math and science classes I could—I was often the only girl in those classes—and I decided pretty early on that I was more interested in the 'applied' side of things than the theoretical. That's how I got into engineering. And I picked mechanical because I've always loved gadgets."

At 53, though, with over 16 years of service in her department, Vivian took her first sabbatical. "That's sort of pathetic, really," she jokes. "Here I am, someone who's supposed to be an expert with numbers, who managed to go more than twice the number of years you're supposed to before taking a break. Sabbaticals are supposed to happen every 7 years; I more than doubled that before realizing it was time."

And during her six months off ("I actually stretched it to nine," she says, "by having the last three months be sum-

mer”), Vivian spent a good deal of that time quite literally recollecting not only her own story, but the stories of her family and her ancestors.

“I come from a big Irish-Catholic family and have tons of aunts and uncles, many of whom live within about a ten-mile radius of each other. I’ve always been the one at family reunions and weddings and such who likes to grill the older folks about the family history. But I’d never done it in any sort of organized way. During my sabbatical, though, I started doing more systematic interviews and writing them up. I also got really into Internet research on genealogy. And one thing I discovered was that there were lots of Marshes out there doing similar research. So, I taught myself some web design and created an interactive website for the sharing of stories and the trading of information. It’s been fascinating to hook up with people from around the world who are exploring their roots in the same manner I am—some of whom I’m most certainly related to!”

When Vivian’s sabbatical ended, she decided to go back to her department on a half-time basis. “I’ve sort of done it unofficially,” she says, “there had always been a semester here or there in which I taught fewer classes than full-time status, but I had always made up for that time by doing service work. Now, I’m just teaching less without so much advising, committee work, and so on. It gives me a lot more time to pursue a number of other things I’d always been interested in, including, believe it or not, pottery.” Here she laughs, admitting it sounds “corny” for a 53-year-old woman. “It’s the glazing process I find particularly fascinating. As a scientist, I’m quite intrigued by the

chemical changes that take place with the various glazes and different temperatures. As a matter of fact, I'm thinking of writing a paper about glazing for presentation at a conference. Wouldn't that make the 'old boys' squirm in their seats."



The person who is merely aging is a 53-year-old who tries to look like a 21-year-old. The person who is a new elder like Vivian Marsh doesn't mind looking fifty-three, but can engage comfortably with a twenty-one-year-old.

The new elders, like Vivian, neither mourn the passage of time nor deny it. Instead they have chosen a brand new way of looking at their age: Accept the biology but reject the psychology. They accept how old they are, but refuse to let it shape their lives. They have shifted, as Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi writes, from an "age-ing to sage-ing" outlook on life.

New elders like Vivian Marsh and Richard Strozzi Heckler know they are not just here by chance. They feel connected to those who came before them and in that sense are keepers of their legacies: "wisdom-keepers."

Deep in our souls, we all want to live in a story larger than ourselves. For each of us, the real story is personal and purposeful: to know what we are here to do and why. Søren Kierkegaard wrote in his journal: "The thing is to understand myself, to see what God really wants me to do; the thing is to find a truth which is true for me, to find the idea for which I can live and die."

Since the dawn of history, humans have been pondering

this existential mystery of life. The same question has riddled us throughout our evolutionary history: “Who am I?”

Walking the Talk

One activity that can be of great help in the process of renewing our stories is walking. Sage adults have long sung the praises of walking as a means of self-understanding. “It is a great art to saunter,” wrote Henry David Thoreau. Walking is obviously one of the most natural of all human activities and as such, it connects us in a deep way to the natural rhythms of humanity.

This isn’t to say that walking is the only way to make such connections; obviously, there are many ways to reconnect to the world around us and recall our stories. Still, many people find the activity of walking and talking to be more natural than sitting and writing. Indeed, there is a great tradition of this: The ancient Greek philosopher Aristotle, for example, made it a habit of doing his philosophizing while walking. Our word *peripatetic* comes from *peripatos*, the covered garden where Aristotle and his followers strolled while discussing philosophy.

Richard recalls contemplating the age-old existential questions while hiking, miles from any town, on the edge of the Serengeti Plain. But he’s not exactly alone. A large community of wildebeest surrounds him, poised as if ready for conversation, looking directly at him. These are quiet, unassuming friends, whom he’s known for years and he’s ready to do some catching up with his bearded companions. In fact, that’s why he’s there. Africa is a sanctuary when he needs solitude, when he wants to recall his own story.

Richard recalls:

I walk in silence. I recall poet Emily Dickinson describing herself as having an “appetite for silence.” In my case, I would say that the appetite is large. To me, incessant societal noise is a disease that can be cured only by going back to the rhythm of silence. These vast, windy hills and plains are a good place to go back to the rhythm. The nothingness fills me. Looking across the Serengeti, I can feel the rhythm. I can feel the Earth inhale and exhale with every breath of mine. The air is heavy with silence, my medicine.

The air is moist and cool. Hiking in the early morning is the best strategy to avoid the intense midday sun and heat. My other friends, the impala, share hillsides with umbrella acacia trees, a classic African scene. Wildlife flourishes around me, both in diversity of species and size of populations. Guinea fowl explode from beneath almost every thorny bush. Thomson’s gazelles and zebras are too numerous to count. Hyenas yip and yodel from dusk until dawn. Here, some predatory voice is always calling.

Hiking between the Serengeti and the great Rift Valley, I can imagine hunter-gatherers exploring the same route, foraging seasonally among food resources on the vast savanna. The path ahead is unclear. There are no trails, only animal paths. This is good, since real trails attract people. Not only in location but in attitude, this place is a world away from most places on Earth. Here, evolutionary history floods the senses. One feels the heart-beat of a thousand generations. It’s natural to ponder the thought that we all live on the same blue marble that circles the same orbit and subjects each of us to the same gravitational pulls.

The freedom of being off trail sharpens my evolutionary senses and makes me alert. It allows me to discern the sense and essence of my story. It reawakens the instincts that were, at one time, critical to our survival. In the hunter-gatherer world, inattention to small movements and sounds could get you eaten. In the natural world, the story of the universe speaks clearly.

I ponder the recent discovery of skull bones of the earliest known ancestor of humankind in the desert of Northern Chad—a fossil nearly seven million years old that will revolutionize our understanding of our beginnings. The discovery—a nearly complete skull, two lower jaw fragments, and three teeth—is three million years older than any other hominid skull discovered to date. The fossils suggest an evolutionary complexity and diversity in human origins that seem to defy description by the family trees of the past. It plays havoc with the current model of human origins where I'm hiking and because the fossils were found so far from here, long considered the cradle of humanity, scientists conclude that these first primitive hominids ranged much more widely than researchers had expected. It is a stunning find.

As I try to wrap my thoughts around this discovery, I realize that everything in life is natural and an evolutionary part of the story. While I may view life's challenges as an abnormality, an unnatural state, hunter-gatherers hold life's challenges differently. The hunter-gatherer story might suggest that it is normal to have challenges; suffering and death are part of life. This acceptance does not imply powerlessness or disinterest in a meaningful life. What is implicit is the belief that one can enjoy life in spite of adversity. In fact, it is precisely because of our challenges that we can evolve. It is through our challenges that we become more.

I hear a small, still voice within myself. Although I'm walking on terra firma, I feel a shifting of the underlying

tectonic plates. It tugs at my story—my beliefs about the origin, nature, and destiny of humankind. This voice speaks to me through centuries of human existence. This voice has been with us since we all were hunter-gatherers, a universal ageless voice. This sense has allowed us, as humans, to survive as a species. I'm convinced that we survived because we recalled our stories here on Earth.

Addressing the Eternities

Human beings survived because some time ago we chose to live a life that addressed not the times but the eternities, as Thoreau put it. Story is what makes us human, after all. Among the animals we, perhaps alone, retain this sense of legacy—this sense that living well means more than just surviving. Lions and birds care for their young, but human beings give to their children something with much deeper nourishment: the notion of story—passing something on to others after we pass on.

As early hunter-gatherers, we might have thought of story in terms of passing along a prized bow and arrows. Then, as time passed and we became more removed from the bush, we might have begun to think in terms of passing along more than survival goods. We likely began to develop a sense that our stories, our experiences, our wisdom were worth passing on to those who survived. We began to pass on something of ourselves—something of the spirit—of who we are and what we have learned.

Hunter-gatherers help us recall the larger story. They are a mirror in which we meet life face-to-face and see our place in it. They whisper our ancient stories to us. They remind us

that our purpose has long been to enrich other people's lives through the power of sharing.

An African elder once told Richard that the problem with visiting Africa is that you feel forever in exile after you have left. It's true. That's why he returns year after year. He says, "Many people tell me that they have always wanted to go to Africa, but they cannot explain why. They discover when they do go that Africa reveals to them the ancient human story. It is evolutionary bedrock in some deeper sense. It has a primal draw that truly may be genetically hardwired. I felt that way from my first trek in Africa and I leave with the same feeling today. The trek may be over but my journey isn't."

As descendents of those who started out in the bush, we humans retain this sense of story—this sense that our lives have meaning and purpose, and that living life fully means more than merely surviving. We retain a notion in our souls that goes beyond the natural laws of "eat, avoid being eaten, and procreate."

As time has passed and we have become more removed from the bush and savanna, we have come to understand that there are more ways to nurture the ones we love than by teaching them to hunt and gather. We began to develop a sense of life's lessons that we had learned, and these formed a story every bit as worthy of passing on as the bow and arrows.

So in a very real sense the stories told by elders around the fire, like the Honey Guide story, were the first legacies—lessons to pass on to those who survived. They're stories—as are all our lives—that involve a journey, a quest for truth, a triumph of purpose, and a homecoming. There's a reason that the fireside story has lived for thousands of years. It's essential. And we

must continue to claim our place at the fire and tell our stories from generation to generation.

Yet this tradition of the fireside story—or oral legacy—has lapsed over time as we have moved farther and farther away from the natural world. Many people have come to see their legacy almost exclusively in terms of material things. Many people Richard coaches every day increasingly question whether the material world has taken over their lives to the detriment of other, spirited things. His work often uncovers a yearning in people, a desire to pass on more than the material wealth they have accumulated. They want to pass on something of themselves—their story—of who they are and what they have meant. Through our stories we share what is most precious to us—not only what we have earned, but also what we have learned.

From over three decades of working with men and women in the second half of life, Richard has observed that mid-lifers look for some kind of story renaissance—some new vision to guide them and connect them to a new sense of purpose in the second half. The experience of working with these people offers simple proof that in large part we are spiritual beings. Stuff, no matter how much of it we accumulate, is not the way successful people keep score. In the end, it takes a distant second place to a purposeful life.

“Maybe it was synchronicity that led David and me to explore these ideas in a book, or pieces of a puzzle that came together at the same time,” Richard recalls. “At around the same time, my wife, Sally, gave me an important book, *Wisdom of the Elders*, edited by David Suzuki and Peter Knudtson. Writing from across indigenous cultures, the elders in the book share expressions of stories to transfer to the next gen-

eration. It was a book that drew the distinctions between true wisdom earned through nature and life's lessons and new age wisdom coined for the sake of earning a living. The book struck a deep chord in me. Maybe it was my own aging or the birth of my first grandchild, Austin, that led me to embrace the idea that I would dedicate the next phase of my life to becoming a new elder. I slowly learned that a new view on aging and eldership was evolving within me. The elder within me was coming to the surface and beckoning me to claim my own place at the fire."

Stories With a Purpose

There is a danger in this emphasis on recalling one's story and the potential shift in attitude toward the world that it may imply. We may interpret this focus on recalling our own story as ego-driven, even arrogant. But that assessment arises from a misunderstanding of humanity's inherently heroic nature.

Each of us is born into a particular family at a particular time and place. These historical circumstances are as important as our genetic makeup. Unique advantages or disadvantages, challenges or privileges, opportunities or handicaps are inescapable ingredients of our own story. Neither are we born into, nor do we live our lives, in a vacuum. The combined consequences of the period and place into which we are born define us as surely as does our DNA.

And so, it becomes clear that from the beginning, we are not self-made. Others have provided for our well-being (or not) in a host of ways. And it is not just our parents or guardians who have done so. Unknown strangers who planted trees whose shade we enjoy, forgotten architects of the

buildings we work or learn in, anonymous inventors of gadgets that make our lives easier—all these and more are the characters between the lines of our own story. And so, in recalling our story, we inevitably recall the stories of others.

Also, in the process of recalling our stories, we may realize how far our lives extend both into the future and back to the past. The human story carries on. In recalling our own story, we may be inspired about opportunities to act with reference to the legacy we shall leave. Awareness of the future that the young and unborn will inherit is part of our changed attitude toward the external world.

Soon after Dave's daughter, Amelia, was born in 1997, his dad pointed out to him something pretty remarkable. "I know your daughter," he said, "and she's likely to live 80 or so years into the future, let's say 2080 just to round it off. I also know my grandfather, who was born in 1870. That means I have personally connected with the lives of people spanning over 200 years. You know, it's often said that our children and grandchildren make us aware of our mortality; for me, it's the opposite: I'm made aware of my immortality."

Dave's dad's observation is profound: Our lives have great reach, both forward and back. While few of us will live more than 100 years, nearly all of us will have had a direct influence on people's lives over more than two centuries.

What this should remind us of is how much difference our lives do make—no matter what. The mere fact that the range of our influence is so broad ensures that our time spent here on Earth has not been for naught.

Of course, this bestows upon us a heavy responsibility to do something with our time, to make the most of it that we can. But more to the point, it bestows upon us a real sense

that we do matter, that we're here for some reason, and that emphasizes, as Dave's dad put it, our immortality.

And when we can tap into this, it can, if we hold it in the proper perspective, give us great hope not just for the future, but for the past, as well. The people we call new elders embody this by living more creatively than ever. Unlike mid-lifers who desperately try to hang on to fading youth, new elders are taking more risks to inspire new growth. They use their profound awareness of the waning number of years they have left to live as an inspiration for how they live their lives.

The ways in which we respond to this potential growth in the second half of our lives will be as varied as our own individuality. To express their purpose, some will plant trees, others will become environmentally active for the first time, others will seek to mentor the young, through writing, speaking, or direct action. The form of the purpose matters little; the desire to benefit future generations is crucial.

Our experience as new elders will be vital to the extent that, by enabling us to reconnect with our own past, it brings about a new relationship to the future. Capable of appreciating the power of the moment, we also care passionately that generations to come will enjoy opportunities as rich as those we have enjoyed.

New Elderstories

Probably all of us have had the experience of being “trapped” with an older person who just goes on and on about his or her life. You're on the airplane, trying to get some work done, and Uncle Joe just won't shut up about his aches and pains and operations. Or you're in the waiting room at the dentist and

Aunt Mary keeps showing you pictures of and talking about her grandchildren.

So, when we think of recalling our stories, this image may come to mind. Having been the “victim” of such storytelling, we may recoil from the very idea of doing so.

But the storytelling we’re interested in here isn’t just the personal recalling of one’s own experiences—although certainly that does figure into it. When we’re talking about storytelling here, we’re talking about something much broader.

First, it’s important to note that the purpose of the sort of stories we’re interested in here—we’ll call them new elderstories—is different. The primary purpose of new elderstories is not to give the teller an opportunity to simply bend someone’s ear or vent; rather, it is to provide some guidance or inspiration first to oneself and, secondarily, to the one being told.

Second, new elderstories have a context that connects them to something more than just the individual. In the telling of new elderstories, we aren’t just going on about our own lives, we’re offering a perspective that connects our own experience to something more universal.

In the telling of new elderstories, three stories emerge. Each of us begins by articulating “my story”—our own hero’s journey, if you will. We move, then, to communicating “our story”—the myths and legends of our own people. Finally, elders learn to articulate “the story”—the common themes of humanity that bind us all together, in all ages and at all times.

The stories of Mitch Albom’s former professor, Morrie, in *Tuesdays with Morrie* are a powerful example of such stories. Subtitled *An Old Man, a Young Man, and Life’s Greatest Lesson*, the book’s central message can be summed in Morrie’s state-

ment: “When you learn how to die, you learn how to live.” While Morrie talks to Mitch about events in his own life, the stories have a power that resonates beyond the details he provides. Moving beyond Morrie’s experience, the stories encompass the emotional realities of Mitch’s life, too. Then, expanding even further, Morrie’s story comes to articulate universal stories of life and death, as well.

One way to begin crafting such stories from your own life experience is to approach them backward. That is, rather than starting with the personal, start with the universal and think about the experiences you have had that reflect those larger concerns. As a way to approach this, you might start with some of the “big questions” and work your way back to your own story.

This is pretty much the approach favored by the Great American Think-Off, a nationwide competition sponsored by the New York Mills Regional Cultural Center that encourages philosophical reflection by “regular folks.” Each year, they propose a “big question” for people in all walks of life to answer. In 2003, for instance, their question was “Do We Reap What We Sow?”

Dave used his own experiences as an unsuccessful child gardener to argue that we don’t, in fact, get back from the universe exactly in proportion to what we give out. Whether or not his answer is correct is somewhat beside the point; what was effective about his essay—at least for the Think-Off judges—was that it drew from the personal to comment on the universal.

When we are able to do this, we go a long way toward making connections with others that are illuminating to all parties involved. Dave learned a lot from his experience in the Think-

Off, probably much more than his audience. Nonetheless, it's clear that he touched them in some way; they did, after all, vote him as tied-for-third Greatest Thinker in America!

The Question That Recalls the Story

When we're young, we think that by the time we're old, we'll have it all figured out. And of course, the terms "young" and "old" are all relative.

At age 6, in first grade, we think the 9-year-olds in fourth grade have all the answers. As a freshman in high school, we look at the seniors and are amazed by how together they have it. In our 20s, starting out in our careers, we imagine that by 30 or 35, we'll have everything figured out. What we learn, though, at every stage, is how much more we need to learn.

Most of us were probably taught that by the time we were moving into the "retirement years" that we'd no longer be wondering what life was all about. We'd be old and wise and no longer be questioning what we were doing with our life and why.

But the reality is, the big questions are never fully answered. Living a vital and purposeful life means continually making the very same inquiries of oneself at 60 as one did at 6. We must never stop wondering why we're here, what we should be doing with our lives, who we should be doing it with, and where.

In short, living a vital and engaged life means that we never stop asking ourselves the question, "What Is the Good Life?"

In our book *Repacking Your Bags*, we defined a formula for the Good Life as: *Living in the Place you belong, With the People you love, Doing the Right Work, On Purpose.*

Living the good life means integration, a sense of harmony among the various components of one's life. It means, for example, that the place where you live provides adequate opportunities for you to do the level of work you want to do. That your work gives you time to be with the people you really love. And that your deepest friendships contribute to the sense of community you feel in the place you live and work.

The four elements of the good life—place, people, work, and purpose—continue to beg for attention at every stage of our lives. Just because we are moving into the second half doesn't mean we can ignore the vocation question entirely. (In fact, as we move into a less intense phase, it probably means we need to consider the vocation question more seriously.)

Reflecting upon these elements is a powerful means to recalling your own story. The questions that follow provide you with a framework for thinking about who you are and how you've become that person.

These are essential questions to ask when examining your transition to the second half of life. How you answer them will guide you in claiming your place at the fire as a new elder.

Questions for Recalling Your Story

Question Category: Who Am I?

- What, and how deep, is my spiritual foundation?
- What is my relationship with death?
- Who are my spiritual teachers?
- How present am I in the moment?

- How much time do I take for solitude, reflection, and prayer?

Question Category: Where Do I Belong?

- How healthy is the place I'm living for me?
- How at home do I feel in my home?
- To what extent do I feel I belong in my community?
- What opportunities do I have where I live to do the things I love to do?
- How well do I manage my life so I mostly do what I care about?

Question Category: What Do I Care About?

- Who comes to me for help?
- What are my gifts?
- How am I using my gifts on the things I care about?
- How fulfilling is my work?
- How is the balance of work and play in my life?

Question Category: What Is My Purpose?

- How clear am I of my purpose?
- How aware am I of my legacy?
- What difference am I making in the world?
- Who have I voluntarily helped in the last month?
- What connections do I have to something greater than myself?

Think about these questions in a manner that really encourages reflection. There is no rush; you don't have to answer all of them right now. In fact, the more time you take with them, the more meaningful your answers. Use these questions as a way to dig deeper into your life's story. Take a long look at where you are and how you've gotten here. How can you harvest the wisdom you've gained in the first half of life to sow it more fully in the second half?

Examine your life. What is good about it? What is missing? How do you relate to where you live? How are your relationships? What is happening with work? How are you expressing your purpose? Are you living your own authentic version of the good life (or someone else's)?

All the experiences in your life have brought you to this point in your life. Nowhere can you find better clues to your future than by revisiting and reintegrating the life you have already lived. In no way will you more effectively write the story of tomorrow than by recalling the story of your past.

Recalling the Story Recalled

The value of recalling our stories is twofold: Doing so enables us to better understand ourselves, and it enables us to more effectively connect with others in the world. So one test for whether our recollections are helping us to grow as new elders is to see whether they are inspiring self-awareness and deepening our relationships. Uncle Joe's tired litany of woes seems unlikely to do either of those; the life lessons communicated by new elders like Richard Strozzi Heckler or George Leonard seem to have both those effects.

Dave recalls a story that he often shares with the Philosophy for Children classes he leads.

I tell this story to illustrate a couple of things—the ethical theory known as Utilitarianism and some problems with it—but most importantly, my own steps and missteps in trying to figure out the right thing to do. It’s a pretty simple story, grounded, more or less, in the Utilitarian view of right and wrong: that actions are right insofar as they maximize total happiness. That is, actions are right providing they lead, in the words of one of Utilitarianism’s seminal theorists, John Stuart Mill, to the “greatest good for the greatest number.”

In any case, the story is this: Some years ago, I had very dear friend, Jimmy, who was dying of AIDS. He was a wonderful man, with amazing joie de vivre and a bittersweet gallows humor about the situation in which he found himself. In the last few months of his life, due to the wasting syndrome associated with AIDS, he could hardly eat. He lived, during this time, mostly on bottled water and Triscuit crackers. But with his attitude on life, he found even this strangely humorous, and as a result, developed this sort of ironic fascination with Triscuits. Whenever he would finish a box of them, he’d stack the box next to his bed, building up what he referred to as “The Great Shrine of Triscuit.” He joked that when he died, he wanted to be buried in a casket made of the tasty wheat snacks.

I was living in Santa Fe at the time and was planning one last visit to Los Angeles to see him before he passed away. I was shopping around for a gift and found myself in a cooking goods store. As I walked in, I saw, on a small dorm-sized refrigerator, the perfect gift for Jimmy. There, stuck to the door of the mini-fridge were four magnets—Triscuit magnets! Made out of plastic, like

the demonstration food in the windows of sushi restaurants, they were perfect replicas of the small square crackers that Jimmy so adored.

I took one off the refrigerator and brought it to the checkout counter. “I’d like to buy this magnet,” I said to the shop owner who stood behind the cash register.

“Sorry,” she replied. “Not for sale.”

I didn’t quite get it at first. “No, I’d like to buy this,” I said. “Pay cash money for it.”

“I understand,” she said. “But that magnet isn’t for sale.”

“Oh, please,” I said. “Let me explain.” I told her all about my dying friend and his love for Triscuits and how this would be the perfect gift.

“Yes,” she said, “I see. But I’m sorry, I had to go all the way to Japan to get those magnets and they are not for sale.”

“I’ll give you 50 bucks,” I said.

“Sorry, not for sale,” she replied with finality. “We have many other lovely gift items, and I’m sure if you shop around you can find something. But those magnets are not for sale.”

At this point (I tell my audience), I had a decision to make. What was the right thing to do? According to Utilitarianism, the act that maximizes total overall happiness is what’s right. So, I had to do a little Utilitarian calculus. I added up how happy Jimmy would be to get the magnet, how happy I’d be to give it to him while keeping in mind how unhappy the store owner would be to have one of the magnets go missing . . . and the answer was clear.

The right thing to do was to steal the magnet.

So, I tucked it into my pocket, browsed around a bit to allay suspicion, and darted out the door. And of course, I was right: Jimmy was delighted to get the magnet—and even more delighted

that I had stolen it for him—and I like to think that when he died a few months later, that perhaps someone took it off the metal lamp next to his bed and placed it gently in his coffin.

But now, when I look back at this, it seems to me that I didn't do the right thing—or at least, that I could have done much better. I didn't have to steal the magnet, after all. When I tell this story to kids, they ask me things like: “Did you leave the 50 bucks?” “Why didn't you just make your own magnet using a real Triscuit, some varnish, and glue gun?” One fifth-grade girl said to me: “How do you know that those four magnets weren't given to her by her four children who died tragically, and those are the only mementos she has of them?”

So when I recall this story and tell it, I am not simply—I hope—recounting an event in my own life. I'm also hoping to make a larger point about learning from one's mistakes and perhaps even a larger point about the human experience of trying to do our best but failing.

Students tend to really enjoy it when I tell them this story. It humanizes me, shows how fallible I am, and gives them some insight, I think, into their own attempts to do the best that they can.

Also, each time I recall it and retell it I find I learn something more about myself. I used to tell it simply as an explanation of Utilitarianism. Later, I came to see it as illustrating how difficult it is to determine the right thing to do. Lately, I find the central lesson to be, as I said above, something about human fallibility. And I think as I continue to recall and retell it, I'll discover something else as times goes on.

The point we want to make here is that recalling our stories is not something we do once and then are done with. It's an

ongoing process of recollection and revision, one that can help us more fully understand ourselves and help others understand us better, as well. We urge you, therefore, to take advantage of opportunities to recall your own stories and as a result, find new connections to ancient and powerful stories of which we are all a part.



The Fireside Chat

Each of the core chapters in this book ends with what we are calling a *Fireside Chat*. We offer these sections as a way to help you stimulate dialogue with friends, family, and colleagues to keep alive the fire started in each chapter.

We encourage you to literally have a chat around a fire. As we have noted, there is something quite powerful about fire as a stimulant to reflection. Sitting in the dark, gazing at the dancing flames, does something to us as human beings. The fire seems to naturally draw the words from us. Perhaps it has something to do with the calming effect of watching the flames—which were certainly humanity’s first “home entertainment center.” Perhaps it has something to do with the way fire connects us so powerfully to our human origins. Whatever the case, if you can manage to center your fireside chats around a fire, so much the better.

Even if you can’t, we encourage you to make time for these discussions at a time and in a place that encourages thoughtful reflection. Turn off the TV and cellphones. Lower the music. Center yourself by finding your breath. You may want to extinguish artificial lights. We’ve found it very effective to use candles if a real fire is impractical.

When you and your fireside partner (or partners) are ready, begin your fireside chat.

This fireside chat encourages you do develop dialogue around the recalling of your own life story. It will be enhanced if you conduct the discussion with a person or persons with whom you are particularly close. Dialogue with a close friend, a loved one, a family member, someone who makes you feel good about who you are and who cares for you deeply.

The Firestarter Question

Allow yourself a journey back into and over your life. Consider the many points in your life when you might have made different choices leading to different paths, but at which you made a choice that led to the path on which you currently find yourself. We call these points the “trigger points” in your life.

Imagine a graph of your life. Starting with your birth story, rank the high and low trigger points in your life. Think of the high points as those points at which you made choices whose outcomes you are especially satisfied with. The low points will be those at which you made choices you feel more ambivalent about.

Then, draw a timeline connecting all the points. Reflect on this timeline and consider what it says about the life you have lived—and the life you haven’t.

Have a fireside chat centered around the following questions:


- What events do the dots on your lifeline represent?
- Which events made a major difference in the life you have led?
- What are the lessons you take from the choices made at each of the points?

Encourage your fireside partners to all contribute to your story. Help them create theirs. Speak your minds. Speak from the heart. Keep the fire of dialogue alive!



Tending the Fire

At the conclusion of each chapter, we offer this section called *Tending the Fire*. Here you will find additional ideas and/or practices that may help address the question broached in the preceding pages. Consider this section another way to spur dialogue—both with others and yourself—on each flame of vital aging. It’s not so much a “how to” segment as a “what if?” or “why not?” piece. You may find it useful to engage in each *tending the fire* activity as you move through the book or you may prefer to set them aside and do them as time permits. Either way, whatever works best to tend your own fire within.



The Flame of Identity: Who Am I?

Most of us will find it difficult to live on purpose in the second half of life unless we contemplate the big picture—unless we recall the first half and reflect upon who we were and how that affects who we are in this new phase of life. Unfortunately, such reflection takes time, something many of us have little of. Reflection, it seems, is becoming a lost art in a world driven faster and faster by new technology and globalization.

But we can’t really live purposefully until we know

ourselves. And this means we must—at least occasionally—find some way to hit the pause button, to still ourselves and contemplate the big picture, the overall scheme of things.

One way to do that in context of the flame of identity is to look at your life from the far end of it. Imagine, for instance, you are looking back over your life on the occasion of your 90th birthday.

You have chosen to celebrate your 90th birthday by gathering around a fire with your dearest friends, family members, and colleagues. If you could throw a log on the fire for each time you made a significant difference in the lives of those assembled, would you have a bonfire or a flicker?

The people gathered have requested that you share a few significant stories from your life. Which ones will you choose? What makes those stories special to you?

Think over the events, experiences, and happenings of your life in terms of throwing logs onto your 90th birthday fire. As you do so, reflect on how the following have helped fuel your fire:

- Music, literature, and art
- Spirituality and religion
- Education and lifelong learning
- Vocation and work
- Play and recreation
- Friends and colleagues
- Family and spouse/life partner
- Your own parents and their aspirations for you

What will you do with the second half of your life so that your birthday at age 90 will be celebrated with a roaring fire?

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