

## “Starting Older”:

# Understanding and Making the Most of a New Life Phase

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Tomorrow is my turn  
To receive without giving  
To make life worth the living  
For its my life I'm living  
No more doubts no more fears  
All these years I've been learning  
My only concern  
For tomorrow is my turn  
—Charles Aznavour

“What do I do now?” This question that hits with a thud just a few times in our lives. Leaving college for the “real world”, after a divorce or when the nest empties, and, again with ferocity when one is facing entering a phase of life between mature adulthood and old age.

I'm 65 years old now. For the last few years, something has been changing inside me with profound shifts in my relation to myself, my work, my family, and my engagement in the world. I began to realize that I was entering a new life phase—and also realized it didn't have a name. I knew I wasn't alone in facing the life-altering challenges of this nameless new life phase. I decided to call it “Starting Older”. It's past “the prime of life” and past late middle age, but it is not equivalent to “retirement” or elderhood.

Recognition that you're entering this new phase of life creeps up on you. You don't feel old. But one day you notice that you're the oldest person in the subway car. Not every day, but surprisingly often. On that same subway car, a woman stands up and gives you her seat. You think, "Wait, aren't we about the same age?" You're grateful, but a little uncomfortable. No, you realize, you're not the same age. You're in your mid-sixties, or rounding 70. She must be in her early 40's. Out to dinner at a restaurant, you start noticing that you're the oldest couple in the room. You don't recognize the names of the actors winning Oscars.

This isn't like the much heralded and disruptive mid-life crisis that hits at forty or so. That's cataclysmic, kaleidoscopic.

This new state of life, though no less impactful than the mid-life crisis, is quiet and often subtle, though new awareness can hit like a flash of light. Still, it tends to inspire contemplation, not revolution. Subjectively, this phase of life does not feel like the beginning of old age. It begins about age 65, or a few years before. It ends when serious aging becomes more of an issue, in one's late 70's or 80's most commonly. A chronic illness such as Parkinson's Disease may truncate this life phase and usher in true old age earlier. But if general good health persists, it is expectable to spend somewhere between one and two decades in this phase of life.

You feel creative and productive, but for a variety of internal and external reasons, just continuing to do what you've been doing since you were in your 40's and 50's doesn't make sense any more. So what do you do now?

You've just passed the peak of an arc. Energy and vision drive it upward through your 20's, 30's and 40's. In your 50's you might realize you've accomplished everything you set out to (noticing that with some surprise) and it feels good. A decade later, the pitch of stimulation is gone.

At 64, I realized I was facing something very different, a part of my life that had no checklist, no advisors, and no roadmap. I knew that for me, continuing to do what I had been doing was not an option. It no longer felt right, stimulating or satisfying. But this was a rather unsettling revelation, because I hadn't planned on doing anything else. I was a psychiatrist and psychoanalyst who saw patients, and a person who did a lot of volunteer work in organizations pursuing projects some that interested me—and doing a lot of things others asked of me because I was good at them. But what did I want to do now?

There is little guidance for those of us hitting this new life phase. It's not well-defined or characterized in the psychological or sociological literature. There's a good reason for the lack of definition and consideration of this life phase. For most people, it didn't really exist before. Living longer and living longer healthy and active have literally created a new stage of life.

In my parents' generation, the idea was you'd retire—maybe at 65? — travel, play golf, maybe volunteer, pursue a hobby, enjoy your grandchildren. Then if you were a couple, one of you was likely to get sick after a couple of years. By your early seventies, you spent a lot of time juggling doctors' appointments. The energy available for travel often constricts to visits to children and grandchildren, who quite likely lived a half day or day's tiring travel away.

## Beyond Sixty-Five Plus

Whether the field is marketing, public policy, healthcare, psychology or population statistics, the last age group considered in the life cycle is usually called “65+”.

The Census Bureau does acknowledge that the baby boomer generation will profoundly change the age structure of our population. A 2010 Census Bureau Report, “Changing Age Structure Within the Older Population” notes:

“The age composition within the older ages is projected to change between 2010 and 2050. As the baby boomers move into the older age groups, beginning in 2011, the proportion aged 65–74 is projected to increase. Most the country’s older population is projected to be relatively young, aged 65–74, until around 2034, when all of the baby boomers will be over 70.”

This study warns that once the baby boomers are over 85, the proportion of more dependent older Americans will have substantial impact on the economy and society.

Nevertheless, one is hard pressed to find any exploration of the particular needs and experience of the 65–74-year-old cohort across disciplines. In fact, the “starting older”, “old” and “very old” age cohorts have very different needs and interests and importantly, very different internal subjective experiences.

## Starting Older and the Ages of Man (and Woman)



The seminal psychological work on the life cycle was Erik Erikson’s “Eight Ages of Man” which he introduced in his first book, *Childhood and Society*, published in 1950 when Erikson himself was 48 years old.

Erikson’s model gained enormously popularity and influence, and has been widely taught in college psychology courses for generations. Erikson identified a core conflict or tension that characterized each life stage, the resolution of which was necessary for an optimally successful life. In Erikson’s model of the life cycle, adulthood comprised three stages: Young Adulthood (stage 6), Adulthood (stage 7) and Maturity (stage 8). By his own admission, Erikson was more interested in the childhood stages of development and felt that he only sketched out the parameters of the adult stages.

The challenge of Adulthood is “generativity versus stagnation”. The mature adult is productive, creative and above all “generative”. Generativity describes both a trait and a practice. It includes the ideas of “passing on” knowledge and wisdom, and “bringing up” and forward a new generation. In addition to taking care of one’s own family, in this stage of life, the generative adult takes care of and contributes to the growth of her business, profession and community. In the business and professional world, these are the leaders, owners, masters of their field or craft.

While Erikson himself did not assign numerical ages to his life cycle stages, generations of psychologists teaching his model have almost universally ascribed ages 40-65 to Adulthood and “65+” to Maturity.

So, after 65, if you follow the Eriksonian scheme, you enter the final stage of life, Maturity, where the central psychological tension for Erikson is achieving “ego integrity versus despair”. The essential virtues of this stage are renunciation and wisdom. Erikson says that having achieved generativity, one now turns to solidifying an experience of order and meaning. There is acceptance of one’s one and only life cycle as something that had to be. Death is accepted. Failure to navigate this phase successfully leads to fear of death, per Erikson, which occurs when the one and only life cycle is not accepted as the ultimate of life.

*Potency, performance and adaptability decline; but if vigor of mind combines with the gift of responsible renunciation, some old people...can represent to the coming generation a living example of the ‘closure’ of a style of life—only such wholeness can transcend the petty disgust of feeling finished and passed by, and the despair of facing the period of relative helplessness which marks the end as it marked the beginning.*

While this vision is interesting, if a little gloomy, when we think about the end of our lives, the description does not fit the subjective sense of self of a 65-year-old in good health who is just “starting older.” We in this life stage think often about change, but rarely about renunciation. I know I am not ready for a life of renunciation, nor am I looking for closure on my life. I do not need to face helplessness, thankfully, not yet. Yet I no longer feel the ambitious striving and deep sense of responsibility that propelled my until very recently.

Sticking to Erikson’s schema, I suggest that “Starting Older” be inserted as stage 7.5. I’ve played around with trying to define a central psychological tension to tag stage 7.5 as Erikson did the other life stages. Unmoored versus Anchored? Or Creative Re-invention vs Facing the Void? Or Re-invention of the Self vs Confusion and Bewilderment?

In the Western canon, the earlier and renowned model of the life cycle was written by William Shakespeare in *As You Like It*. Particularly fascinating is that the adult ages of man depicted by Shakespeare in 1599 correspond closely to those of Erikson, written 350 years later.

Shakespeare’s Adult stage is personified as “the justice, in fair round belly with good capon lined, full of wise saws and modern instances”. He’s affluent, a leader, and influential. This is mid-to-late middle age, an individual at the peak of his power and influence.



*Figure 1 The Justice*



*Figure 2 Aged Man with Reading Glasses, Cane and Pouch*

Shakespeare's one departure from Erikson is that he divides old age into two stages. First he depicts a shrunken man in slippers, with reading glasses, his pouch by his side (presumably so he doesn't have to

get up much), with a voice weakened to a childish treble. This is an elderly man, inactive, enfeebled and rather pitiable.

The final life stage for Shakespeare is what we would recognize today as impending death— “mere oblivion, sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything.”



Figure 3 "Mere Oblivion" The Final Stage

“Starting Older” is the missing life stage between Shakespeare’s potent and established well-fed justice and the enfeebled elderly man in retreat from the world.

I found the strongest support for recognizing this new life phase in an unexpected place—an essay on aging based on the teachings of the Lubovitcher Rebbe. It’s worth quoting at some length:

*At the basis of the institution of retirement is the notion that life is composed of productive and non-productive periods. The first 20-30 years of life are seen as a time of little or no achievement, as a person acquires knowledge and training in preparation for the productive period of life. The next 30-40 years are the time in which his or her creative energies are realized; he now returns what has been invested in him by his now passive elders, and invests, in turn, in the still passive younger generation. Finally, as he enters his “twilight years,” he puts his period of “real” achievement behind him; he has worked hard “all his life,” so he now ought to settle down and enjoy the fruits of his labors. If the creative urge still agitates his aging body, he is advised to find some harmless hobby with which to fill his time. Indeed, time is now something to be “filled” and gotten over with as he whiles away his days on life’s sidelines, his knowledge and abilities filed away in the attic of old age. He has now returned full circle to his childhood: once again he is a passive recipient in a world shaped and run by the initiative of others. ...*

*Torah, however, recognizes no such distinction between life’s phases, for it sees productivity as the very essence of life: the words “a non-productive life-period” are an oxymoron. [Emphasis*

*added] There are marked differences between childhood, adulthood, etc., but these differ in the manner, not the fact, of a person's productivity. Retirement and the passive enjoyment of the fruits of one's labor also have their time and place—in the World to Come.*

*The promise of a "happy retirement" is a cruel myth: the very nature of human life is that man knows true happiness only when creatively contributing to the world he inhabits. The weakened physical state of old age (or illness, G - d forbid) is not a sentence of inactivity, but a challenge to find new—and superior—venues of achievement.*

## What "Starting Older" Feels Like

If you're entering this new life phase now and have spent your life in business or the professions, look back ten years. A decade ago you were at the peak of your career—running a business, a department, or an organization, or churning out articles. But now, you've been in your career for 30 or 35 years. Your professional life has been, one hopes, very satisfying, and should be a great source of pride and accomplishment. But for many it no longer feels new or fresh. Sometimes you feel like you're on autopilot, or you're not quite exactly as sharp as you used to be. Attrition through retirement and death is gradually thinning your business network. Being great at what you do no longer feels like enough or, sometimes, even important. You've already mentored a younger generation, in your 50s and early 60s. You really don't want to mentor that much anymore. Maybe, secretly, you don't especially want to give, or produce, or join or engage. At least not in the same ways you've always done.

At 65, my personal experience of this new phase of life feels like this. I feel older but not old. I don't feel passive; I do feel restless. I have not finished working, but I want my work to change. I know I am not ready for a life of renunciation, facing helplessness, or closure on my life. Yet I no longer feel the ambitious striving and drive that propelled me until very recently.

For some time, I sense a feeling of selfishness. I want to do what I want to do, to respond to the dictates of my own temperament and soul, to take a break, maybe a permanent one, from meeting the needs of others, from being generative. I don't want to just reflect; I am still eager to DO. But not the same things and not in the same way. I am full of creative energy. But I don't want to keep doing what I've been doing. I've done it, I've exceeded my goals and ambition. I want something different and I want that something to be exquisitely attuned to my inner self. I want the rhythm of my days to be entirely different. I want it to feel more serene, cleaner.

I find myself irritable about different things. I'm tired of responsibility and ownership, the very accomplishments that I worked so hard for in mid-life. Though I love the three-flat home I live in, I would like a doorman to let me in when I come home tired, and a building superintendent to take care of things when they break.

"Starting Older" feels a little bit like adolescence. All loose ends and awkward elbows. The structures you fit into comfortably a decade ago—socially, professionally, family, start to feel like a bit of a poor fit.

## *Post-generativity*

One 74-year-old put it like this: “I don’t want to be generative. I feel selfish. I was generative. In my 50s.’ Another: “What I’m really good at I don’t want to do anymore.”

The common advice to share your wisdom and be generative and mentor can fall flat. My friend Nate, a 68-year-old film director, said that in his experience, younger people, those who we are supposed to be sharing our wisdom with, don’t really want our advice that much. They don’t want to hear that a story they’ve written is banal and trite, or that an organizational solution has been tried before and failed. Often they want to reinvent the wheel, without the unsolicited cautions or perceived cynicism of an older generation.

## *Turning Inward*

Nate, my filmmaker friend, added another important theme. “I’m tired of being judged. Of producing things for others’ approval or ratings or funding. I want to do something just for myself, that I don’t have to show anyone.” Woodworking was his current source of pleasure— an entirely private enterprise for a man who had lived his professional life in a very public way.

Another friend, May, is still professionally very active, though she copes with a chronic illness. She put it this way:

*I realized this year that, even if I were physically fine, I am just about done with this work. You’re right- I have loved it, done it well, been excited about it – but feel that I am just not there anymore. Of course the illness makes it that much worse- some days when I am in a flare, I can barely make it through all my hours and just want to go to sleep. I have found it much easier than I ever have to take off days now, and am much slower than I have ever been to return calls. It is almost as if I need that excuse, though, to cut back drastically, which is sad! And there does seem to be space that I need for me, after all this self-sacrifice. I just don’t want to do this anymore, or at least not at this intensity and pace.”*

*I have noticed that while the familiar feels exhausted and exhausting and I crave something new I also experience a negative reaction to newness and change. I want to be home more. Two consecutive weekends away exhausts me. I feel a turning inward, and certainly a dramatically decreased interest in making other people happy.*

## *Time*

People in this phase of life report experiencing a new sense of time. Certainly part of this is an urgent or new awareness that time is limited. But the changing sense of time is more complex than that a simple linear view.

For me, on my 64th birthday, my relation to time shifted from a passive to an active attitude. Until then, I always had a sense of postponement, of waiting for “my time” to come. Sometimes I fantasized that I would make a big change in my life (which I felt I wanted) if some new opportunity fell in my lap— summoned not by my effort but dropped upon me by a *deus ex machina*.



I had spent a lot of time entertaining a fantasy about one particular opportunity. If that became available, I would tell myself and my friends, *then* I'd change my life. Suddenly, one day, that plan looked awfully foolish. Why was I waiting for something to magically fall in my lap, something that actually was extraordinarily unlikely to make that journey to me? I could and should make the radical changes I wanted in my life happen, but I would have to commit to it very seriously and actively. And the sooner the better, because, yes, time suddenly showed its limits.

There's another way time is experienced differently, and this may be the way you begin to notice you're in a new stage of life. You start to see the arc of your life, marked and shaped by the work you did, the things that happened, the relationships you made and broke. You also see a kind of retrospective ideal—the live that could have been, should have been. If not for this demanding mother that made you into her caretaker, if not for that controlling father who undermined your confidence and made you strive for the wrong things, if not for this random tragedy that broke up your life, or that accident, or this loss, or that war or this economic downturn.... you see the arc of a life that could have been yours—an easy fulfillment of your talents and tastes. You imagine you might have known better, back at the beginning of adulthood. Could you have visualized then and embarked on that life that you now can see would have suited you best? The answer is no. You can only see that path now because of all the life you've lived—your real self emerges into awareness gradually, taking shape as you live and experience yourself moving in the world.

### *The Negative Side of Starting Older—Facing the Void*

Starting older is inherently transformative. It is also discontinuous and disruptive. At times the experience is very painful. Sometimes the sense of what-could-have-been carries with it a breathtaking feeling of grief. Grieving is a necessary part of this time of life, and essential to making the most of it.

Other negative feelings are expectable. Gradual reduction in power and influence can be demoralizing and destabilizing. Being overtaken by a younger generation can lead to competitiveness and insecurity.

Exaggerated fear of dependence and illness may result in poor decisions. This fear can lead to denial and failure to make adaptations to the inevitability of eventually declining self-reliance and health.

The worst negative state experienced in this life phase is what I call "facing the void". This frightening state of mind occurs most often in those who have failed to reflect and, prepare realistically to face a phase of life in between full productivity and power and the end of life. They have no plan for who to be, how to be, what to do, and how to live in the life phase between middle and old age. These individuals tend to hang on too long and inflexibly to what they know and the identities that have sustained them. In business, when a founder or other key individual experiences this stage of life as facing a frightening void, succession issues are very problematic.

## The Start of a Roadmap

Because it's a "new" life phase, there is no roadmap for "starting older". It is a period of vitality and effort but one requiring new vision, new concepts and a plan. In this section I will attempt to sketch out the key components that need to be part of a vision for this life stage. These include:

- Facing Reality
- Seeking Novelty
- Pursuing Creativity
- Increasing Freedom
- Identifying and Fulfilling Abandoned Dreams and Talents and
- “Essentialism”

## *Facing Reality*

Facing Reality comes first. Without it, time is wasted, relationships fray and options shrink. Tremendous depression and anxiety can haunt the person entering this life phase what he avoids the reality that it is very likely time to make significant changes in his life, including work responsibilities, home life, and focus.

What are the realities that need to be faced? Time is limited. Delaying doing what is most important to you might mean you never do it at all. You will face more loss and physical limitation. These won't be as consuming as they will be in the last 5-10 years of life, but they won't be rare. You need to cultivate resilience and realistic acceptance.

Continuing to do what you have always done may be unwise. If you don't make room for another generation, you may be shunted aside, or worse, tolerated and resented. You should not assume that you will never need to make a change in your work and personal life until illness and frailty overtake you. You may not—that's partly up to you, by choice, and partly determined by circumstances beyond your control.

But you should envision change and multiple plans so that you don't face the big black void if change becomes necessary or desirable.

The reality is that there is a disruption here. Something is different. Don't ignore that.

## *Seeking Novelty*

When I realized my life was entering a new phase and that I wanted something different, I thought back over the last year—when had I felt really alive, and stimulated? One of the experiences that came to mind was a weekend psychopharmacology course I had attended some months before. Though I prescribed medication in my psychiatric practice, “psychopharmacologist” has not been central to my professional identity. I kept up on the latest developments casually—looking at journals, listening to an occasional podcast, and talking to colleagues when I was stumped. But I hadn't actually listened to expert lectures on the subject in three decades!

The weekend spent listening to some of the country's best thinkers and up-to-date researchers in psychopharmacology was extremely enjoyable, because it was different from what I had been doing for years. The content was different; the people were different. The core feature that made this experience stand out as a highlight of my year was that it was novel.

## *Pursuing Creativity*

The other experience that came to mind when I asked myself what had I really enjoyed in the past year was painting. I've never taken so much as a drawing or art class in my life, but I am a visual person, often

thinking in images and needing to diagram phenomena or the relationship between ideas to explain them to myself or a patient. My husband was very ill at the time (thankfully since recovered) and during the most frightening part of his illness where we thought his life would be measured in months not years, he told me about a dream he'd had:

"We were in a snow swamp. You were on a sled. I needed to pull you to higher ground". Snow swamp was the perfect image for the state we were in then—the ground shifting under us, the chill of death in the air, the danger of falling into a hidden hole. I was deeply touched by his dreaming this for me—having the wherewithal to think about and care about me in the face of his own terrors. Most of all, I felt the image from the dream form in my head and I felt a compulsion to paint it. An artist friend asked what she could do to help us in this stressful time. Instead of the usual casserole, I asked if she could teach me the basics of painting—I meant really the basics—what materials to buy and how to use them.

After the snow swamp painting, I embarked on a series of small paintings about the life cycle. The images had always been in my head. What was different now was the urgency to do something with them. My family and I have been going to the same beach every summer since 1953. I had noticed that the same scenes recurred—it didn't matter if it was 1953 or 1983 or 2013. There was always the industrious toddler, hauling a pail of water up from the ocean; 10-year-old kids playing in the surf, the yearningly flirtatious 16-year-old, new parents with an infant, middle aged couples reading, grandparents watching the babies. I had been all of them, on that same beach, up through, now, late middle age verging into "starting older". Painting was new, creative, utterly absorbing.

I was discovering that part of my "what do I do now" was something creative and "right brain".

### *Increasing Freedom*

This is one of the most exciting opportunities inherent in this phase of life, perhaps the most fundamental. We can try to shed the need to please people, impress anyone, serve duty and meet the demands of generativity. It can be surprisingly hard to break the mindset of not feeling free.

### *Identifying and Fulfilling Abandoned Dreams and Talents*

One reason the psychopharmacology conference I described above made me feel so alive is that the subject helped me connect to a part of myself that I had half-discarded along the way—the medical psychiatrist.

My 31-year-old son is a real estate attorney who lives in New York's West Village. His life is busy with a new marriage, career goals he's still refining, and a circle of friends with whom he enjoys travelling, eating out, music, watching sports and generally soaking up the life of young professionals in the world's most stimulating city. But I was cleaning out some things and ran across dozens and dozens of drawings he made as a boy. From age 4 or 5 to the beginning of adolescence he was constantly drawing. For a while he wanted to be an architect. Now, I'm quite sure he never thinks of drawing or doing any kind of art. But I wonder, when he reaches his time of life between mature adulthood and old age, will he re-find this part of himself that was so important, yet fell by the wayside as he pursued other interests?

I can picture each of our lives as a long road trip, with parcels of half developed interests and talents dropped along the way. Music here, art there, a bit of religion a couple of miles later. In this phase of life,

it is time to retrace our steps, picking up the bits that have been abandoned, and seeing if we want to give them a second chance.

## “Essentialism”

This is a concept explored by consultant Greg McKeown. In his book *Essentialism*, McKeown argues that people should make personal decisions by thinking carefully about what is essential to them, choosing to do that, and eliminating what is not. There’s considerable merit in his argument that this approach will help people produce more and live under less pressure, living “a life true to yourself, not the life others expect from you.

While McKeown is endorsing this approach for adults of all ages, I think the concept is especially apt for those of us starting older.

## Conclusion

This article defines a “new” life phase, “Starting Older”, that intersects with key turning points and challenges in the lives of individuals and organizations. In a business or organization where decisions about succession, exits and transfer of wealth and power are being planned and negotiated, the emotional experiences of those involved who are in this life stage are powerful influencers that can energize the process or throw up obstacles and create impasses. The individual in this life phase needs to feel stimulated, safely protected from “the void”, fulfilled and free. He or she needs a vision, encouragement and a personal plan to make this interesting and newly available stage of life maximally satisfying.

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