

# Third Age Brings New Beginnings

*by Paul Stevens, Founder / Director, The Centre for Worklife Counselling*

**T**hird agers, second lifers, grey pathers, baby boomers, seniors, the sandwiched generation and many more labels are being imposed on those who are over 45 by sociologists, life coaches, political commentators and the media. These labels often obscure the need to make the second half – indeed, the last half – of our lives a fulfilling, life-extending experience.

The first half of our lives teaches us many things. One is that our life journey comprises an unpredictable mixture of expected and unexpected events – both pleasurable and many less so – as well as non-events, i.e. those we expected to occur but have not.

As we pass midlife, we can find ourselves confronting a range of such events, prompting issues needing to be resolved. These can be an urgency to turn undefined or suppressed dreams into realities; or exploring clear and imaginative part- or full-time retirement plans; being outplaced from our employment and looking for ways to begin anew; seeking

to define our purpose



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away from traditional linear careers towards a range of paid and unpaid activities of choice rather than of necessity; facing the option of voluntary redundancy; desiring new learning of a nature that stimulates our growth as a person, not just for a career advancement advantage; or looking for ways to improve our work-life balance as we experience deleterious effects on our relationships from too much of the former.

Options previously considered impractical are open to evaluation and decision-making freedom. We can resolve to make our own changes without having to attend innumerable meetings as probably occurred in the past and can make them at our own pace. The outcomes could be:

- A holistic plan for my next life stage.
- Pragmatic assessment of what is possible; what is less so.
- Expanded awareness of my options – paid and unpaid.
- Enhanced feeling of being more in control of my life direction.
- Empowered to turn my plans into realities, optimistic and eager to implement.

Consider just some of the options in Figure 1: Life Planning Options. Any one or a combination of these events are an opportunity to decide on changes, i.e. to allow to happen what may have been put off for many years.

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*Unless a person takes charge of them, both work and free time are likely to be disappointing.*

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi

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## **Transition, i.e. the journey**

So, how do we move to the next life stage, whether into our consolidating forties, our flourishing fifties, adventurous sixties or serene seventies and reflective eighties?

Changes require transitions, i.e. a journey having several important steps taken in a deliberate sequence in order to cope with them well. As you re-examine your life during this transitional time, you empty or discard what is no longer of importance, sort out what is worth repairing and polishing from what has outlived its usefulness in order to find your essence again. You will then move on to experience a renewed zest for life. Now is not the time to downsize your dreams. It is a time to increase your optimism and be adventurous in your decision making. It is

## Figure 1: Life Planning Options

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  - Seek full-time employment      Earning income in similar work to your current career.
  - Seek flexi-work employment      Part-time hours or job share, e.g. two people sharing one job for, say 2.5 days per week each or one works mornings, the other afternoons; or 'slot pooling' e.g. five people share three full-time jobs.
  - Seek work as contractor      Work assignments of a long-term nature as a subcontractor, not as an employee.
  - Telecommute      Home-based work tasks using technology.
  - Change career content      Identify new career field via self-assessment and exploration which suits your revised life and career needs.
  - Seek unpaid work      Apply your energy, motivations, abilities and maturity to volunteer activities providing services to others.
  - Create own business      Be entrepreneurial and take carefully calculated risks creating your own commercial enterprise.
  - Seek project or contract assignments      Assignments where you work and earn for a specified period of time.
  - Seek mentoring role      Apply your learning about life, relationships and work to the guidance of others younger than you.
  - Enrol in educational course      Engage in studies for the joy of learning and intellectual stimulation rather than as an investment in a career.
  - Seek portfolio of life-work activities      Use your skills and knowledge in several concurrent activities, either income-earning or not.
  - Negotiate phased retirement      Scale back working hours with current employer.
  - Bridge employment      Alternate periods of disengagement from the workforce with periods of temporary, occasional or self-employed work.
  - Take a sabbatical      Take a long break from work and other commitments to pursue a particular interest or enjoy an adventure.

a chance to set priorities about how you will spend your time and allow your playful creative side to expand at the expense of your cautious safekeeping self.

Once you get started, you will experience new insights about yourself occurring at odd times – when you are showering, eating, meditating, driving or walking. That's the nature of things when you commit yourself to this life review process.

Self-assessment is the first step in the life review and renewal planning process. While you may think you know yourself well, it is important to take an up-to-date audit of yourself. Critical aspects, such as your values and preference for using certain skills, may have changed since you previously considered them. Your transition planning will be more effective if you assess thoroughly your personal resources and what you really want in terms of activities, whether paid or unpaid, or a combination of both.

Self-assessment involves asking yourself complex questions while sifting progressively through data about yourself. Allow yourself time to think deeply. Be honest with your responses. An inventory, or aspects of one's self-image as it is sometimes referred to, has been built up of all one's experiences including the successes and failures, good and bad times.

You are now in the process of planning the next steps for your life. You are selecting new activities which incorporate your own balanced plan of leisure, relationships, work wellness and desired new learning. You have given yourself permission to look at

who you really are and what you want. You can then enjoy the fruits of your preparation and the investment of your emotions and labour. What may some of these fruits be? Here are two examples – mentoring and work options:

### **Mentoring**

Mentoring is an activity that be very rewarding when we are in the second half of our lives. Mentoring provides a way for continued achievement, recognition and value. It involves transferring one's own achievements to the satisfaction derived from helping the achievement of another person who is usually younger. Mentoring is an opportunity to pass on what, over the years we have taken so much trouble to learn. Mentoring is an alliance of two people that creates a setting for dialogue that results in reflection, action and learning for both. It can provide rewards of meaning, fulfilment and usefulness.

### **World-of-work options**

There is new reality about working. We now have the opportunity to see our employment as a series of successive contracts where our relationship with each employer or engaging organisation is a transactional arrangement. This negotiated agreement is for only as long as there is a need for specific work to be done. We can, therefore, be portfolio careerists where we have a portfolio of skills and a portfolio of clients, i.e. employers or organisations either for-profit or not-for-profit or both.

Instead of entering a hierarchical arrangement of job positions, we can be engaged to accomplish

specific tasks. We no longer have to fill a position, but match our skills with contract requirements. We used to search for a 'job box' we could fit into. Now we search for a niche – a custom-fit solution using our transferable skills to an organisation's need.

In portfolio working we derive our work satisfaction from accomplishing tasks and the intrinsic motivation that results from this. We can string together a series of work engagements using our different attributes, different sets of skills, knowledge and interests. We can rearrange our employability offerings many times in packages of differing content according to our inclination, personal circumstances and the labour market situation. We can frequently re-cluster and repackage our skills acquired over the previous 25 years or more to meet new opportunities.

As a portfolio worker, we can be engaged as a contractor, job share, freelance, temporary hire, free agent, volunteer or casual. We can grow personally without dependence on one organisation and exercise our new freedom to undertake assignments compatible with our values. We give our allegiance to our professional skills and standards. We are focused on our lifestyle with a symbiotic relationship of consumerism and an ethic to contribute to work with meaning.

Sometimes we may work as a 'satellite' worker from or near our home, on-line through our computers and modems, on client's sites or in a different country from where we are deriving our income.

The framework or structure of

a planned portfolio replaces the questionable security of full-time employment. The new structure is an important part of regulating and enjoying life. Income may come from several sources, not one as was the case in the past.

In fact, portfolio working is not new. It is how people earned their incomes before the 19th century.

### Helpful events

Making the transition from a full-time career situation in our third age to a range of activities often coincides with other changes in the circumstances of our personal life. Consider the following: Family members leaving can free up the equity in one's home to invest in new ventures. The maturing of children opens up options so that parents can now help them more when needed with their issues and ambitions. Reduced family expenses can allow a different group of activities for self to be considered. The much-travelled business person can now focus on local community matters for perhaps the first time and feel refreshed and purposeful by doing so.

### Resources

The process of sorting out one's life priorities alone is far from an easy task. Today the Internet can lead us to information and resources that can facilitate it. For example, an appropriately accredited career and life planning coach can be found through such sites as:

<http://www.aacc.org.au>

<http://www.acpinternational.org>

<http://www.goinglobal.com>

<http://www.aacmp.org.sg>

Recently published is the *My*

*Third Age Work and Life Choices* (ISBN 1 875134 51 4) workbook – a resource I have designed to help you with this journey. You control the pace you work through it. You can choose to do parts of it at home, at work, on a personal retreat or on vacation.

*My Third Age Work and Life Choices* is a structured learning resource, designed to assist you to identify, evaluate and decide about your future activities. Its objectives are to help you with positive aging and renewing your enjoyment of life, as well as assist you with the problems associated with making a transition in your older years.

The portfolio of life-work activities you will create by using this resource will combine each aspect of your life into a plan that you can follow. It will consist of a cluster of activities – unpaid or paid – plus leisure time organised with a thoroughly worked out purpose.

A self-assessment instrument of the card sort methodology, *Portfolio Life-Work Card Sort Kit* (ISBN 1 875134 47 6), has also been designed and published.

For those providing skilled help to third agers, such as career counsellors, coaches, life management trainers, I have designed a training course which can be licensed to approved professionals to facilitate the new learning of their clients. The workshop's title is *Third Age: New Beginnings*.

Students enrolled in The College for Career Practitioners (<http://www.worklifecollege.org>) now have an optional study stream, Life-Work Coaching of Third Age Clients. This covers

the specific issues those in their third age bring to a counsellor or coach and teaches how to facilitate their resolution.

### Procrastination

We often spend too much time thinking about the future and fantasising what our lives could be. We tend to put off the hard work of undertaking the planning and researching, deciding on the goal and getting things accomplished. Yet nothing of any real substance is going to be achieved unless we do it. On the other hand, you should not go through a life review process simply because someone else thought you should. In order to get authentic, sustainable results, you must really want to complete it to arrive at a stage where you can complete the checklist in Figure 2 confidently.

How do you get started? First of all, if getting started is difficult, you have to approach this procrastination as an obstacle. Once you have recognised it, it should become easier to deal with.

You are going to have to sacrifice some of your free time – and that's a reducing commodity in our lives these days – sit down and do some hard work. How many times have you noticed that once you actually start a project you really enjoy it and become caught up in the momentum that your effort has produced?

You may encounter obstacles, frustration and annoyances during a project of this nature and importance. In the past you may have bought a house, dismantled and reassembled a motor, or prepared for an overseas trip. Any of these would have involved starts,

stops and re-starts, difficulties and hard work. But the pleasure you experience when you reach your goal makes most of the obstacles seem insignificant, even humorous on reflection.

Since 1979, The Centre for Worklife Counselling that I founded and continue to manage in Sydney has been helping adults in their career management and life planning and

coaching their transition to new ways of working and living.

Recent third age clients who have made significant life management decisions convey a quiet pride in their comments

## Figure 2: Are You Ready?

To confirm that you are ready to move on in your transition journey, read the following checklist of important actions and confirm that you have completed them:

### Self-Assessment



- I have assessed my current situation and inventory of my thoughts about my transition
- I have a list of my paid work likes and dislikes and my reasons for them
- I have identified what motivates me and my interests
- I have analysed my finances (savings, investment income and expense requirements)
- I have identified how to continue learning

### Interpreting Data

- I have a summary of my preferred skills, values and desired activities
- I have drafted a plan of action steps which should provide opportunities for improving life satisfaction

### Opportunity Awareness

- I have explored several activities and gathered relevant, realistic information
- I have a list of discarded activities, together with the reasons for my decision to discard them
- I know what work – paid and unpaid – is my target

### Decision Learning

- I have defined for myself what aging means to me
- I am making decisions based on what I have learnt
- I have researched, evaluated and decided how I will get where I want to be
- I have discussed my future plans with the significant others in my life

### Transition Training

- I have thought out my transition strategy and have discussed the strategy and its rationale with my spouse or partner, career helper or life coach, support group, best friend, mentor or sponsor
- I have the enthusiasm and optimism to put my planning into action
- I know about current technology, e.g. the Internet, Word, Excel, etc. to a proficiency level that I can use effectively on my own, if needed

reflecting their feelings of accomplishment:

*Gives me courage to say 'no' or 'no longer' to less important things.*

*Doing my financial planning around these will now make sense.*

*In my second half I have resolved to be with people who add energy to my life, not with those who take energy away.*

*I'm not just rearranging my life; I am expanding it!*

*My map to passion and purpose!*

*Gives me clear boundaries around my three valuables – time, talents, money.*

*I'm no longer trapped by the expectations of others or society in an uneventful third age.*

Their comments confirm the early 20th century wisdom of Marcel Proust, who wrote:

*The real voyage of discovery is not in seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes.*

This was reaffirmed by Cesare Pavese who later commented:

*The search for a new personality is futile; what is fruitful is the human interest the old personality can take in new activities.*

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This article is published in the interests of promoting best practice in the provision of support to adults in their career management and life transitions and to enhance their contributions to those who employ them.

### **WORKLIFE® – An Explanation**

The term 'Worklife' was chosen to reflect our continuing work in research, counselling, training and publishing material which relates to improving people's enjoyment from their employment activities and other aspects of their lives.

We do not accept the traditional view of career support – that is, to help people acquire satisfaction only from their working hours. We consider that occupational satisfaction can only occur when a person's total needs are included in the assessment of what is lacking and what needs to be done to increase inner wellbeing, improve relationships with others and perform effectively both at work and non-work activities. 'Life' in Worklife means our focus is on the total person. 'Work' relates to the paid and unpaid roles in which the person is involved (employee, student, homemaker and citizen) and their environments (workplace, educational institution, home and community).

Ours is a holistic approach – in our counselling and career training workshops we consider all features of a person at the same time as maintaining respect for personal privacy by use of non-threatening inquiries into thoughts and circumstances.

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