

SUN TZU SEAGULL

Clear Eyes,
Steady Hands,
and Free Flight
in the Second
Half of Life



LORENZ PLOURDE



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Dedication

This book is dedicated to all those who continue becoming.

To the artists who keep creating long after the world expects them to slow down.

To the teachers who continue sharing what they have learned.

To the mentors who quietly guide others without seeking recognition.

To the dreamers who refuse to believe that curiosity has an expiration date.

To the lifelong students who understand that learning never truly ends.

To the friends, family members, and fellow travelers who have shared wisdom through conversation, example, encouragement, and sometimes through mistakes.

To those who have faced setbacks and chosen to begin again.

To those who continue asking questions.

To those who remain interested.

To those who still look toward the future with hope.

Guiding Voices

"Know the enemy and know yourself; in a hundred battles you will never be defeated."

— Sun Tzu

"The Way is in training."

— Miyamoto Musashi

"You have the freedom to be yourself, your true self, here and now."

— Richard Bach

Three very different teachers.

One lifelong journey.

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Introduction

Why I Wrote This Book

I am not a general.

I am not a samurai.

I am not a philosopher.

And despite what Richard Bach might have us believe, I am certainly not a seagull.

I am a videographer in British Columbia who, like many people, has spent a lifetime trying to figure things out.

Along the way, three books stayed with me.

The first was *The Art of War* by Sun Tzu.

The second was *The Book of Five Rings* by Miyamoto Musashi.

The third was *Jonathan Livingston Seagull* by Richard Bach.

At first glance, they seem to have little in common.

One is an ancient military text.

One was written by a Japanese swordsman.

One is a short story about a bird who refuses to accept the limitations imposed by his flock.

Yet I found myself returning to all three at different stages of life.

Sometimes years would pass between readings. Then something would happen—a setback, a difficult decision, a conflict, a new opportunity—and one of them would find its way back into my hands.

Over time I began to notice something.

The lessons that stayed with me were rarely about war, combat, or even success.

They were about seeing clearly.

About remaining adaptable.

About choosing battles wisely.

About continuing to learn.

About resisting the temptation to drift through life asleep.

Most importantly, they were about becoming the person you are capable of becoming.

As I entered my sixties, those lessons began to take on new meaning.

When I was younger, I read these books with the eyes of ambition.

Like many people, I was interested in achievement, advancement, and overcoming obstacles.

As the years passed, my perspective changed.

The questions became different.

How do you maintain a sense of purpose when some of your traditional roles begin to disappear?

How do you find direction when life changes unexpectedly?

How do you avoid becoming bitter?

How do you continue growing when society quietly expects you to slow down?

How do you remain free without becoming isolated?

How do you stay awake?

Those questions led me back to the same books yet again.

What surprised me was that I was no longer reading them for strategy.

I was reading them for perspective.

The older I became, the less interested I was in winning arguments, proving myself, or accumulating achievements.

The more interested I became in living wisely.

That realization eventually led to this book.

This is not a book about military strategy.

It is not a book about retirement.

It is not a book about becoming wealthy, influential, or successful.

And it is certainly not a book that claims to have all the answers.

In fact, most of the ideas in these pages are not new.

Many are thousands of years old.

Others were taught to me by family, friends, mentors, artists, coworkers, and ordinary people I met throughout life.

Some I learned through experience.

Some I learned through mistakes.

Some I am still trying to learn.

The truth is that most wisdom does not need to be invented.

It needs to be remembered.

That may be one of the great challenges of growing older.

We already know many of the things that matter most.

We know relationships are important.

We know health matters.

We know bitterness rarely helps.

We know learning should not stop.

We know kindness matters. We know purpose matters.

Yet life has a way of distracting us from what we already know.

We become busy.

We become worried.

We become tired.

We experience losses.

We face disappointments.

Sometimes we simply forget.

This book is my attempt to remember.

The pages that follow are not presented as instructions.

Think of them instead as observations from a fellow traveler.

Some are inspired by Sun Tzu.

Some by Musashi.

Some by Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

Many are drawn from experiences that occurred far from battlefields or martial arts schools.

They come from business meetings, creative projects, friendships, failures, documentaries, artists' studios, dragon boats, coffee shops, and quiet moments of reflection.

Over the years I have come to believe that wisdom often appears in ordinary places if we are paying attention.

A conversation with an artist can teach patience.

A difficult season may reveal resilience.

A mistake may teach humility.

A setback may require adaptability.

Sometimes failure eventually offers a lesson.

Sometimes it simply asks us to recover and continue.

The purpose of this book is not to convince you of anything.

It is simply to share a collection of ideas and observations that have helped me navigate the second half of life. If they help you see something more clearly, wonderful.

If they remind you of something you already knew but had forgotten, even better.

Because I suspect that is what wisdom often is.

Not discovering something entirely new.

But remembering something important at exactly the moment we need it.

The world often speaks about aging as though it were a slow process of becoming less.

Less capable.

Less relevant.

Less adventurous.

Less useful.

My experience has been different.

Not easier.

Not free from loss.

Not free from uncertainty.

But different.

I have met artists creating some of their finest work in their seventies and eighties.

I have met people who discovered new passions after retirement.

I have watched individuals continue to learn, teach, contribute, and grow long after others expected them to stop.

They convinced me of something simple.

The second half of life is not merely about decline.

It is about becoming.

The shape of that becoming may change.

The pace may change. The terrain may change.

But the journey itself continues. And that is where our story begins.

Part I
Clear Eyes



Chapter 1

The Terrain Has Changed

One of the first lessons I borrowed from Sun Tzu had nothing to do with warfare.

It was the idea of terrain.

In military terms, terrain refers to the ground on which events unfold. A wise commander pays attention to hills, rivers, forests, weather, distances, obstacles, and opportunities. The same army can perform brilliantly on one type of ground and disastrously on another.

The lesson is simple.

Before deciding what to do, understand where you are.

Yet many of us spend years doing the opposite.

We continue acting as though we are standing on ground we left long ago.

We make decisions based on outdated assumptions.

We fight old battles.

We pursue goals that no longer fit.

We use strategies that worked twenty years ago and wonder why they suddenly seem ineffective.

The terrain changed.

We didn't notice.

Or perhaps we noticed and didn't want to admit it.

I certainly did this myself.

Like many people, I spent much of my life working, planning, building, and trying to move forward. There were careers, responsibilities, financial concerns, deadlines, projects, and all the other things that occupy most adults.

Without realizing it, we begin to assume that today's terrain will look very much like tomorrow's.

Then one day it doesn't.

A company changes.

A career ends.

Children grow up.

Friends move away.

Health changes.

Parents age.

Spouses die.

Technology transforms industries.

Entire ways of life disappear and are replaced by something new.

The terrain changes whether we approve of it or not.

One of the most difficult transitions many people face occurs around retirement.

Not because retirement itself is good or bad.

But because the terrain changes dramatically.

For decades, many people know exactly where they are needed.

The alarm clock rings.

The schedule is set.

The expectations are clear.

The role is understood.

Then suddenly much of that structure disappears.

Freedom arrives.

But so does uncertainty.

What now?

Some people flourish.

Others struggle.

The difference is often not intelligence, education, or financial success.

The difference is whether they recognize that they are standing on different ground.

A strategy designed for one terrain rarely works well on another.

Imagine trying to navigate a mountain trail using a road map of a city.

The map may be excellent.

The problem is not the map.

The problem is that you are somewhere else.

Many people continue using a map designed for achievement when the terrain is now calling for contribution.

Others continue using a map designed for accumulation when the terrain now rewards wisdom.

Some continue measuring themselves by productivity when life is quietly inviting them toward mentorship, creativity, reflection, or service.

The old map is not wrong.

It is simply incomplete.

One of the great gifts of age is perspective.

When we are younger, it is easy to assume that life is a straight line.

Work hard.

Achieve goals.

Accumulate success.

Move forward.

But experience teaches otherwise.

Life unfolds in seasons.

Each season asks different questions.

The season of building asks:

"What can I create?"

The season of responsibility asks:

"What must I carry?"

The season of mastery asks:

"What have I learned?"

The season of elderhood asks:

"What can I pass on?"

Problems arise when we refuse to acknowledge the season we are actually living in.

I have met retired people still trying to compete with thirty-year-olds.

I have met successful people unable to let go of titles they no longer hold.

I have met individuals whose greatest suffering came not from aging itself but from fighting reality.

The terrain had changed.

They were still fighting the last campaign.

This does not mean surrender.

Far from it.

Accepting reality is not the same thing as giving up.

In fact, accepting reality is often the beginning of effective action.

A sailor who ignores the wind is not demonstrating courage.

He is demonstrating stubbornness.

A gardener who refuses to acknowledge the seasons will harvest very little.

A dragon boat steersperson who ignores changing water conditions risks putting the entire crew in difficulty.

The first responsibility is always the same:

See the water clearly.

Then steer accordingly.

That principle has served me well throughout life.

Sometimes the terrain changes gradually.

Sometimes it changes overnight.

Several years ago, I found myself navigating significant uncertainty.

Income changed.

Employment changed.

Plans changed.

The future looked less predictable than it had only a short time before.

At first, like many people, I spent energy wishing things were the way they used to be.

That never helped.

Eventually I began asking a better question.

Not:

"Why did this happen?"

But:

"Where am I now?"

That question changed everything.

The old terrain was gone.

The new terrain contained challenges.

But it also contained opportunities I would never have seen otherwise.

The artists I work with today.

The documentaries.

The books.

The YouTube channel.

The conversations.

The projects.

Many of these things emerged because the terrain changed.

Had everything continued according to the original plan, some of the most meaningful work of my life might never have happened.

That does not mean I enjoyed every transition.

Most people don't.

Change often arrives wrapped in uncertainty.

Sometimes grief.

Sometimes frustration.

Sometimes fear.

But hidden inside many transitions is an invitation.

The invitation is not to become who we used to be.

It is to become who we are now capable of becoming.

This is where many people become stuck.

They spend years trying to recover a previous version of themselves.

The younger version.

The stronger version.

The wealthier version.

The version with more certainty.

The version before loss.

The version before change.

Meanwhile, life waits patiently.

Not behind them.

Ahead of them.

The future rarely asks us to become who we once were.

It asks us to become who we are next.

That begins by recognizing the terrain.

Seeing it honestly.

Without denial.

Without pretending the change does not hurt.

Without turning pain into personal failure.

Without romanticizing the past or assuming the future has nothing to offer.

Simply seeing what is.

Sun Tzu understood this long ago.

Before strategy comes observation.

Before action comes understanding.

Before movement comes awareness.

The wise person begins by studying the ground beneath their feet.

So before we discuss purpose, discipline, contribution, freedom, or wisdom, I invite you to ask yourself a simple question:

What terrain am I standing on today?

Not ten years ago.

Not twenty years ago.

Not the terrain you wish existed.

The terrain that actually exists.

Because every meaningful journey begins there.

With clear eyes.

And a willingness to see.



Chapter 2

Know Yourself

One of the most famous ideas associated with Sun Tzu is simple:

Know yourself.

Most people immediately understand the words.

Far fewer understand how difficult the practice can be.

Knowing yourself sounds easy.

After all, who could possibly know you better than you?

Yet experience suggests otherwise.

Human beings have an extraordinary ability to see clearly almost everywhere except in the mirror.

We notice the habits of our neighbors.

We recognize the mistakes of coworkers.

We identify weaknesses in politicians, athletes, celebrities, and strangers on the internet.

But our own blind spots often remain invisible.

That is why self-knowledge is not a destination.

It is a practice.

A lifelong one.

When I was younger, I believed knowing myself meant understanding what I liked and disliked.

What career interested me.

What hobbies I enjoyed.

What goals I wanted to pursue.

Those things matter.

But they are only the surface.

The deeper questions arrive later.

What situations consistently bring out my best?

What situations bring out my worst?

What fears influence my decisions?

What stories do I keep telling myself?

What strengths can I genuinely rely upon?

What weaknesses repeatedly create problems?

Where am I fooling myself?

Those questions require honesty.

Honesty is often uncomfortable.

But without it, growth becomes difficult.

Musashi wrote about perceiving what cannot be seen.

I have always liked that idea.

At first it sounds mysterious.

Then you realize he may simply be talking about learning to see what is already there.

Including parts of ourselves we would rather ignore.

Most of us carry around an image of who we think we are.

Sometimes that image is too flattering.

Sometimes it is unnecessarily harsh.

Both distort reality.

The goal is neither self-criticism nor self-congratulation.

The goal is accuracy.

To know yourself means understanding both your gifts and your limitations.

Many years ago, I discovered something about myself that has repeatedly proven true.

I am naturally attracted to projects.

Ideas excite me.

Possibilities energize me.

I enjoy building things that did not exist before.

A YouTube channel.

A documentary.

A book.

A new direction.

When an interesting challenge appears, my mind immediately begins exploring it.

This tendency has served me well.

It has also created problems.

The same strength that allows a person to begin projects can sometimes make finishing them more difficult.

A person who loves possibilities can become distracted by new possibilities.

Recognizing that pattern helped me.

Not because the pattern disappeared.

It didn't.

But because awareness gave me choices.

I could build systems around it.

I could compensate for it.

I could laugh at it when it appeared again.

Self-knowledge often works this way.

The goal is rarely perfection.

The goal is management.

A sailor does not eliminate the wind.

He learns to work with it.

A gardener does not eliminate the seasons.

She learns to plant accordingly.

Likewise, we learn our own tendencies and adapt.

One of the most useful questions I have ever asked myself is:

"What keeps showing up?"

The answer reveals a great deal.

What mistakes keep repeating?

What successes keep repeating?

What relationships keep repeating?

What frustrations keep repeating?

Patterns are teachers.

Life is often trying to show us something.

If the same lesson keeps appearing, it may be worth paying attention.

Sometimes the lesson concerns a weakness.

Sometimes it reveals a strength we have underestimated.

I have seen this repeatedly while working with artists.

Many talented artists struggle to recognize their own abilities.

What appears ordinary to them often appears extraordinary to everyone else.

Because they live with their gifts every day, they stop noticing them.

The same thing happens outside the arts.

People often underestimate the very qualities others admire most.

Patience.

Kindness.

Reliability.

Humor.

Perseverance.

Wisdom.

These strengths can become nearly invisible to the people who possess them.

Part of knowing yourself is recognizing what you bring to the table.

Not arrogantly.

Accurately.

The opposite problem exists as well.

Some people spend years avoiding weaknesses that everyone around them can see.

A quick temper.

Poor listening.

Impulsiveness.

Stubbornness.

Defensiveness.

The inability to admit mistakes.

These weaknesses rarely disappear because we ignore them.

They usually become stronger.

The older I get, the more I believe that humility is one of the most practical virtues.

Not because it sounds noble.

Because it improves decision-making.

Humility allows new information to enter.

Arrogance seals the door.

A humble person can adjust course.

An arrogant person often continues in the wrong direction long after evidence suggests otherwise.

This matters because life changes.

The terrain changes.

The challenges change.

The person who refuses to update their understanding of themselves eventually becomes trapped by an outdated identity.

One of the more surprising discoveries of later life is that we are never finished.

Many people imagine self-discovery as something that happens in youth.

You figure out who you are and then spend the rest of your life being that person.

Reality appears far more interesting.

We continue changing.

We continue learning.

We continue uncovering strengths, weaknesses, interests, and capabilities we did not know existed.

I have met people who discovered artistic talent in their seventies.

People who became writers after retirement.

People who became mentors after careers ended.

People who found entirely new purposes after believing their most important contributions were behind them.

How could that happen if self-discovery ended at thirty?

The truth is that we remain works in progress.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull understood this instinctively.

The entire story is driven by a refusal to accept artificial limits.

Again and again, Jonathan discovers that what he thought was the end of his ability was merely the edge of his current understanding.

Life often works the same way.

Many limitations are real.

Others are assumptions.

Learning the difference is one of the great tasks of adulthood.

And perhaps especially of elderhood.

Knowing yourself requires distinguishing between what is genuinely impossible and what is merely unfamiliar.

One of the dangers of aging is that people sometimes begin speaking about themselves as though growth has ended.

"I'm too old for that."

"That's not who I am."

"I've never been good at that."

Perhaps.

Or perhaps not.

Sometimes those statements are accurate.

Sometimes they are simply old stories that have survived longer than necessary.

That is why curiosity remains important.

Curiosity keeps the door open.

It allows us to ask:

"What if there is more to me than I currently understand?"

The best self-knowledge is not rigid.

It remains alive.

It remains open.

It remains willing to be surprised.

In my experience, the wisest people are not those who have themselves completely figured out.

They are the people who continue paying attention.

They know their strengths.

They know their weaknesses.

They know their patterns.

But they also understand that there is always more to learn.

That combination creates something powerful.

Confidence without arrogance.

Humility without insecurity.

Awareness without self-obsession.

The result is a person who can move through life with greater clarity.

Not because they know everything.

But because they know themselves a little better.

And that is where all meaningful strategy begins.

Before understanding the world.

Before understanding others.

Before choosing a direction.

Know yourself.

Not perfectly.

Just honestly.

That is enough to begin.



Chapter 3

The Battles Worth Fighting

One of the great advantages of youth is energy.

One of the great advantages of age is perspective.

If we are fortunate, we eventually learn that these are not the same thing.

When I was younger, I often assumed that because something could be fought, it should be fought.

An argument.

An injustice.

A disagreement.

A criticism.

A mistake.

A bad decision.

A competitor.

An obstacle.

If I believed I was right, that was often enough.

Many people spend years operating this way.

Some spend entire lifetimes.

Eventually, however, reality introduces an uncomfortable truth.

Energy is not unlimited.

Time is not unlimited.

Attention is not unlimited.

Every battle has a cost.

Even the battles we win.

This is one of the lessons I borrowed from Sun Tzu.

Not every conflict deserves engagement.

Not every hill is worth dying on.

Not every invitation to fight deserves acceptance.

In fact, one of the most useful skills in life may be the ability to distinguish between what matters and what merely demands attention.

The two are not the same.

Modern life constantly tries to confuse them.

Every day we are presented with things designed to provoke us.

News stories.

Political outrage.

Social media arguments.

Complaints.

Criticism.

Predictions of disaster.

Endless opportunities to become upset about things over which we have little or no control.

Many people spend enormous amounts of energy responding to these invitations.

The result is often exhaustion rather than effectiveness.

I have certainly fallen into that trap myself.

Most people have.

There is something satisfying about feeling involved.

Something satisfying about feeling informed.

Something satisfying about defending our opinions.

Yet after a while I began noticing something.

Many of the arguments I participated in changed nothing.

The discussion ended.

Life continued.

The people involved remained unconvinced.

The world carried on exactly as before.

Only my energy had changed.

I had less of it.

As I grew older, I found myself asking a different question.

Instead of asking:

"Am I right?"

I began asking:

"Is this useful?"

That simple shift altered many decisions.

Because being right and being useful are not always the same thing.

Sometimes the most useful action is speaking up.

Sometimes the most useful action is remaining silent.

Sometimes it is confronting a problem.

Sometimes it is walking away.

Wisdom lies in knowing the difference.

A dragon boat offers a surprisingly good example.

When steering a long boat, the objective is not to react dramatically to every ripple in the water.

If you do, the boat begins wandering back and forth across the lake.

Small corrections become large corrections.

Large corrections create instability.

The crew loses confidence.

Progress slows.

The best steering is often calm steering.

Observe.

Adjust.

Stay on course.

Save major corrections for genuine problems.

Life works much the same way.

People who react to every disturbance often spend their lives zigzagging from one crisis to another.

Every disagreement becomes a conflict.

Every criticism becomes a threat.

Every setback becomes an emergency.

The result is exhaustion.

Not progress.

This does not mean avoiding conflict altogether.

That would be a mistake.

Some battles are absolutely worth fighting.

Protecting people we love.

Standing up to genuine injustice.

Defending important values.

Honoring commitments.

Maintaining integrity.

Speaking truth when silence would cause harm.

These things matter.

The challenge is that worthwhile battles often arrive disguised among dozens of lesser ones.

The ability to distinguish between them becomes increasingly important with age.

Because one of the realities of later life is that time becomes more visible.

At twenty-five, wasting a month feels different than wasting a month at sixty-five.

The calendar begins to feel more valuable.

Attention becomes more precious.

You become less interested in spending your remaining years on nonsense.

At least that has been my experience.

I find myself increasingly asking:

Will this matter a year from now?

Five years from now?

At the end of my life?

Surprisingly often, the answer is no.

That realization can be liberating.

Many arguments disappear immediately.

Many worries lose their power.

Many distractions reveal themselves for what they are.

Noise.

Not every problem requires a response.

Not every criticism requires a defense.

Not every misunderstanding requires correction.

One of the most peaceful discoveries of adulthood is realizing that people are allowed to misunderstand you.

You can spend years trying to control other people's opinions.

You will almost certainly fail.

People see the world through their own experiences, fears, beliefs, and assumptions.

Sometimes they will misunderstand your intentions.

Sometimes they will underestimate you.

Sometimes they will disagree with you.

Sometimes they will simply be wrong.

The question becomes:

How much energy do you wish to spend fighting that reality?

Early in life, many of us spend far too much.

Later, if we are lucky, we begin conserving that energy for things that matter.

Artists often understand this lesson better than most.

Every artist eventually encounters criticism.

Some criticism is useful.

Some is not.

Learning the difference is essential.

An artist who reacts emotionally to every opinion becomes paralyzed.

An artist who ignores all feedback stops growing.

Wisdom lies somewhere between the two.

The same principle applies to nearly every area of life.

Listen.

Evaluate.

Adjust if necessary.

Continue moving.

Do not surrender your direction to every passing voice.

Another battle worth avoiding is the battle against reality itself.

This may be the most common and exhausting conflict of all.

We argue with circumstances.

We argue with aging.

We argue with change.

We argue with things that have already happened.

We argue with facts we dislike.

Reality remains unimpressed.

The argument continues.

We grow tired.

Reality remains unchanged.

Acceptance is often misunderstood.

Many people assume acceptance means approval.

It doesn't.

Acceptance simply means seeing clearly.

The weather may be unpleasant.

A loss may be painful.

A situation may be unfair.

Acceptance does not require liking any of it.

It simply acknowledges what is.

Only then can effective action begin.

Sun Tzu understood that a wise commander first studies the terrain before deciding what to do.

The same principle applies to everyday life.

See reality first.

Then decide.

Not the other way around.

One of the more surprising benefits of choosing battles carefully is that it creates more energy for meaningful pursuits.

When you stop fighting everything, you can focus on something.

Creating.

Teaching.

Learning.

Helping.

Building.

Mentoring.

Writing.

Growing.

Loving.

Living.

These activities require energy too.

The difference is that they tend to give something back.

They expand life rather than shrink it.

They build rather than drain.

They contribute rather than merely consume.

The older I get, the more I believe that attention is one of our most valuable resources.

Where attention goes, life follows.

Spend enough attention on outrage and life becomes outrage.

Spend enough attention on fear and life becomes fear.

Spend enough attention on contribution and life becomes contribution.

Spend enough attention on learning and life becomes learning.

The choice is rarely made once.

It is made daily.

Sometimes hourly.

Perhaps that is the real battle.

Not the argument with another person.

Not the conflict on television.

Not the disagreement online.

But the ongoing decision about what deserves our limited time, attention, and energy.

That battle is worth fighting.

And winning it may make all the others far less important.

Before moving on, I invite you to consider a simple question:

What battle are you currently fighting that is costing more energy than it deserves?

The answer may reveal an opportunity.

Not to surrender.

But to redirect your strength toward something more meaningful.

Sometimes the wisest move is not to fight harder.

Sometimes it is to choose a better battle.



Chapter 4

How Not to Be Fooled

One of the advantages of getting older is experience.

One of the disadvantages is that experience can sometimes make us overconfident.

We begin to believe that because we have seen a great deal, we can no longer be fooled.

History suggests otherwise.

Young people can be fooled.

Old people can be fooled.

Educated people can be fooled.

Intelligent people can be fooled.

Successful people can be fooled.

The methods change.

Human nature does not.

This chapter is not really about scams.

Although scams are certainly part of the story.

It is about something broader.

It is about discernment.

The ability to see things as they are rather than as we wish them to be.

Sun Tzu understood the importance of perception.

Musashi repeatedly emphasized observation.

Both men knew that misunderstanding reality carries consequences.

In their worlds, those consequences could be severe.

In our world, they often appear in quieter forms.

Bad decisions.

Broken trust.

Poor investments.

Manipulative relationships.

Misplaced confidence.

Wasted years.

Most people think deception happens because someone is clever.

Sometimes that is true.

More often, deception succeeds because it offers something we already want.

This is an uncomfortable observation.

But an important one.

The most effective bait is rarely something the fisherman wants.

It is something the fish wants.

That principle applies surprisingly often in life.

The investment scam offers easy money.

The fraudster offers urgency.

The manipulator offers approval.

The politician offers certainty.

The salesperson offers a solution.

The conspiracy theorist offers secret knowledge.

The cult offers belonging.

The internet offers endless validation.

Each appeals to something human.

Hope.

Fear.

Loneliness.

Greed.

Pride.

Curiosity.

The problem is not that we possess these qualities.

The problem is forgetting that we possess them.

One of the most useful questions I have learned to ask is:

"What part of me wants this to be true?"

Notice the wording.

Not:

"Is it true?"

That comes later.

First:

"What part of me wants it to be true?"

That question reveals a great deal.

Suppose someone promises extraordinary investment returns.

Before examining the numbers, it is worth asking:

"What part of me wants this to be true?"

Perhaps the answer is financial security.

Perhaps it is excitement.

Perhaps it is the desire to recover a loss.

Perhaps it is the hope that life can be made easier.

Nothing wrong with those desires.

But once they are visible, they lose some of their power to manipulate.

The same principle applies far beyond money.

What part of me wants this relationship to work?

What part of me wants this opportunity to be real?

What part of me wants this criticism to be false?

What part of me wants this person to approve of me?

Our desires are often the handles through which others can influence us.

Knowing that does not make us cynical.

It makes us aware.

Awareness is one of the recurring themes in this book.

Not suspicion.

Not paranoia.

Awareness.

There is a difference.

A suspicious person assumes everyone is trying to deceive them.

An aware person simply understands that deception exists.

They remain open.

But not gullible.

Trusting.

But not careless.

Kind.

But not naïve.

Those distinctions become increasingly important as we age.

One reason is practical.

Many older adults possess something attractive to scammers.

Savings.

Assets.

Home equity.

Retirement funds.

A lifetime of accumulated resources.

The fraudster sees opportunity.

But money is only one target.

Loneliness can be targeted.

Grief can be targeted.

Fear can be targeted.

The desire for companionship can be targeted.

The need to feel important can be targeted.

In fact, emotional manipulation often follows the same principles as financial manipulation.

Find a need.

Offer a solution.

Create urgency.

Discourage outside opinions.

Apply pressure.

Collect the reward.

The details change.

The pattern remains remarkably consistent.

One of the most valuable habits I have adopted is what I call adding friction.

Most mistakes thrive on speed.

Scams thrive on urgency.

Manipulation thrives on emotion.

Poor decisions thrive on impulse.

Friction slows things down.

A day.

A week.

A second opinion.

A trusted friend.

A written review.

Time has saved me from more mistakes than intelligence ever has.

The older I get, the more I respect delay.

Not procrastination.

Deliberation.

There is wisdom in sleeping on a decision.

There is wisdom in saying:

"Let me think about that."

There is wisdom in refusing to be rushed.

Urgency is often the enemy of discernment.

This applies to information as well.

Modern life bombards us with opinions.

Experts.

Influencers.

Commentators.

Algorithms.

Predictions.

Outrage.

Certainty.

Everyone seems eager to tell us what to think.

Few encourage us to think.

One of the quiet dangers of later life is not lack of information.

It is drowning in it.

At some point, discernment becomes more valuable than knowledge.

Not:

"How much do I know?"

But:

"How do I decide what deserves my attention?"

That is a very different question.

The wisest people I know are rarely the loudest.

They rarely have immediate answers for everything.

They are comfortable saying:

"I don't know."

They ask questions.

They listen.

They observe.

They remain curious.

That humility protects them.

Certainty can be comforting.

Curiosity is usually safer.

Musashi advised paying attention even to trifles.

I have come to appreciate that advice.

Small details often reveal larger truths.

A person's actions.

A repeated pattern.

A broken promise.

An inconsistency.

A tone of voice.

A reaction to disagreement.

Little things matter.

Not because they prove everything.

But because they often point in useful directions.

One of the most painful lessons many people learn is that being deceived does not necessarily mean being foolish.

Good people are deceived.

Smart people are deceived.

Experienced people are deceived.

The goal is not perfection.

The goal is recovery.

Can you recognize the mistake?

Can you learn from it?

Can you avoid repeating it?

That is enough.

Perhaps the greatest deception of all is self-deception.

The stories we tell ourselves.

The excuses we repeat.

The realities we avoid.

The weaknesses we ignore.

The fears we disguise.

Most external deception becomes easier to recognize once we begin noticing the internal version.

That may be why self-awareness and discernment are so closely connected.

The better we understand ourselves, the harder we become to manipulate.

Not because we become suspicious.

Because we become honest.

And honesty sees clearly.

As I look back over my own life, the moments when I was most vulnerable to being fooled were rarely the moments when I lacked intelligence.

They were the moments when I lacked perspective.

When emotion was running high.

When hope was running high.

When fear was running high.

When urgency was running high.

The solution was almost never more information.

It was usually more space.

More reflection.

More patience.

More honesty.

Perhaps that is the lesson.

Not to become distrustful.

Not to build walls around ourselves.

Not to assume the worst about others.

But to move through the world awake.

Awake to our desires.

Awake to our fears.

Awake to our blind spots.

Awake to the possibility that we may occasionally be wrong.

Because awareness is not weakness.

It is protection.

And few things are more difficult to fool than a person who sees clearly.

Not perfectly.

Just clearly enough.

Most of the time, that is enough.



Chapter 5

The Shrinking Life

Of all the ideas explored in this book, this may be the one that surprised me most.

Not because it is complicated.

Because once you see it, you begin seeing it everywhere.

The idea is simple.

Most people do not wake up one morning and decide to stop living fully.

The process is usually gradual.

Almost invisible.

Life becomes a little smaller.

Then a little smaller still.

And then smaller again.

The change happens so slowly that it can be difficult to notice.

A hobby disappears.

A friendship fades.

A challenge is avoided.

A new opportunity is postponed.

A routine becomes narrower.

A comfort zone becomes larger.

Nothing dramatic happens.

Yet over time, the boundaries of life begin to contract.

The world grows smaller.

Research repeatedly points toward the value of connection, curiosity, engagement, and adaptability in later life.

It also shows that purpose, social participation, learning, movement, and plans for the future can diminish gradually—sometimes through withdrawal, and sometimes through circumstances a person never chose.

The change is frequently subtle long before it becomes obvious.

What struck me most was how familiar this pattern felt.

Not because I had only observed it in others.

Because I had observed it in myself.
I suspect most people have.
The shrinking life rarely arrives wearing a name tag.
It arrives disguised as comfort.
And comfort can be very persuasive.
After all, what could possibly be wrong with comfort?
Nothing.
Until comfort quietly becomes avoidance.
The distinction matters.
Rest is healthy.
Recovery is necessary.
Comfort has its place.
But life was not designed to be lived entirely inside our comfort zone.
The body weakens when it is never challenged.
The mind dulls when it is never stretched.
Relationships fade when they are never nurtured.
Purpose weakens when it is never exercised.
Many years ago, I noticed something while working on creative projects.
Whenever I was actively learning something new, life felt larger.
It did not necessarily feel easier.
Sometimes it felt frustrating.
Sometimes confusing.
Sometimes exhausting.
But it felt alive.
The opposite was also true.
When I drifted into long periods of routine without challenge, life became smaller.
The days became more predictable.
The conversations became more repetitive.
The future became less interesting.

Nothing was technically wrong.

Yet something important was missing.

Forward movement.

This is one of the reasons I admire artists.

The good ones never seem finished.

They may become more skilled.

More experienced.

More confident.

But they continue experimenting.

Continue learning.

Continue risking failure.

Continue becoming beginners again.

A watercolor artist tries a new technique.

A sculptor explores a different material.

A musician experiments with a new style.

The willingness to remain a student keeps life expanding.

I suspect the same principle applies far beyond the arts.

Research suggests that sustained engagement in novel, mentally challenging activities can support aspects of memory in later life.

Notice that the keyword is not achievement.

It is engagement.

This book is not arguing that everyone should start a business at seventy.

Or climb mountains at eighty.

Or write a bestseller at ninety.

Some will.

Most won't.

The point is not the activity.

The point is remaining engaged with life.

Remaining curious.

Remaining involved.

Remaining interested.

One of the saddest forms of shrinking life occurs when people stop imagining a future.

Not because they are dying.

Because they stop planning.

Stop dreaming.

Stop learning.

Stop looking forward to anything.

The future becomes a shorter and shorter horizon.

Eventually it disappears altogether.

This can happen at forty.

It can happen at eighty.

Age is not the deciding factor.

Orientation is.

I once heard someone say that old age begins when your memories become more important than your plans.

I am not sure that is entirely true.

Memories matter.

Reflection matters.

Wisdom often grows from looking backward.

But there is something valuable in continuing to look forward as well.

Not necessarily with ambition.

With interest.

What am I learning next?

Who might I help next?

What might I create next?

What adventure remains?

What conversation remains?

What contribution remains?

The specific answers are less important than the existence of the questions.

The shrinking life tends to eliminate questions.

The growing life keeps asking them.

Another pattern appears frequently.

The shrinking life often begins with withdrawal.

Not dramatic withdrawal.

Small withdrawal.

A person stops attending a group.

Stops calling friends.

Stops volunteering.

Stops participating.

Stops reaching out.

Again, nothing catastrophic.

Just one less connection.

Then another.

Then another.

Over time, isolation begins building walls that were never intended.

The research is remarkably consistent on this point.

Social isolation and loneliness are strongly associated with poorer outcomes in later life. They affect not only happiness but physical health, cognitive health, and overall well-being.

Human beings are social creatures.

Even the independent ones.

Perhaps especially the independent ones.

We all need reasons to leave the house.

Reasons to show up.

Reasons to contribute.

Reasons to matter.

The shrinking life removes those reasons one by one.

The growing life keeps creating them.

One of the most dangerous aspects of the shrinking life is that it often feels reasonable.

Every individual decision makes sense.

Skip the class.

Skip the gathering.

Skip the walk.

Skip the project.

Skip the phone call.

Stay home.

Watch television.

Tomorrow will do.

And tomorrow often does.

Until years pass.

The challenge is that life is rarely transformed by one large decision.

It is shaped by thousands of small ones.

The direction matters more than the speed.

A person walking slowly toward growth is still moving toward growth.

A person drifting slowly toward withdrawal is still drifting.

The good news is that the process works both ways.

If life can shrink gradually, it can also expand gradually.

A single class.

A single conversation.

A single volunteer role.

A single creative project.

A single friendship renewed.

A single skill learned.

Expansion often begins just as quietly as contraction.

One of the themes we encountered repeatedly in the research was contribution.

That word requires some care.

A person's worth is not measured by how much they produce, accomplish, or do for others.

No one becomes less valuable because illness, grief, disability, age, caregiving, or circumstance reduces what they can manage.

But when contribution is freely chosen and realistically possible, it can create connection and direction.

It allows something within us to move outward.

Toward family.

Toward community.

Toward creativity.

Toward service.

Toward another human being.

Sometimes contribution is active.

Teaching.

Mentoring.

Volunteering.

Creating.

Helping.

Sometimes it is quieter.

Listening carefully.

Offering encouragement.

Sharing a memory.

Being present.

Allowing another person to care for us and discovering that receiving can also deepen a relationship.

We do not need to remain productive every moment to remain connected with life.

Nor must contribution be large.

A conversation.

A lesson.

A painting.

A garden.

A book.

A grandchild.

A simple act of kindness.

The scale matters less than the connection it creates.

When I think about the artists, creators, mentors, and elders I admire most, they all seem to share one trait.

They remain interested.

Interested in people.

Interested in ideas.

Interested in learning.

Interested in contributing.

Interested in life itself.

That interest acts like a doorway.

As long as it remains open, growth remains possible.

So I would offer a simple question.

Not:

"How old am I?"

Not:

"How much have I accomplished?"

Not:

"How comfortable am I?"

Instead:

"In what ways is my world opening, and in what ways has it become smaller?"

The answer is not a verdict.

A smaller world is not always evidence that someone has stopped trying.

Sometimes life contracts around illness.

Grief.

Disability.

Caregiving.

Loss.

Exhaustion.

Circumstances we did not choose.

In those seasons, expansion may look very different.

A conversation from home.

A book.

A new idea.

Accepting help.

Noticing something beautiful.

Allowing one person a little closer.

We do not control all the terrain.

But somewhere within it, there may still be one small opening.

Sometimes curiosity finds it.

Sometimes courage.

Sometimes kindness.

Sometimes simply the willingness to look again.

Part II

Steady Hands



Chapter 6

The Way Is Still in Training

One of my favorite lines from Musashi is:

The Way is in training.

Simple.

Direct.

Easy to understand.

Difficult to live.

When most people hear the word training, they imagine athletes, martial artists, soldiers, or professionals trying to master a skill.

Rarely do they imagine a sixty-five-year-old retiree.

Or a seventy-year-old artist.

Or an eighty-year-old gardener.

Yet the older I get, the more convinced I become that training is not something we do for a few years.

It is something we do for life.

The form changes.

The principle remains.

One of the strangest ideas modern society promotes is that learning eventually ends.

First we attend school.

Then perhaps college or trade school.

Then we work.

Then eventually we retire.

The implied message is that the learning phase ends somewhere near the beginning.

Everything afterward is application.

Life does not seem to work that way.

At least it hasn't for me.

Some of the most important things I have learned arrived long after formal education ended.

How to navigate uncertainty.

How to recover from disappointment.

How to listen more carefully.

How to let go of things that no longer serve me.

How to recognize manipulation.

How to distinguish movement from progress.

How to remain engaged when familiar roles change.

No classroom ever handed me a final exam on those subjects.

Life did.

Repeatedly.

And often without warning.

Looking back, I can see that many of the people I admire most share a common characteristic.

They remain students.

Not necessarily students of academic subjects.

Students of life.

Students of people.

Students of craft.

Students of themselves.

I have seen this repeatedly while working with artists.

The artists who continue growing are rarely the ones who believe they have mastered everything.

They are the ones still experimenting.

Still asking questions.

Still trying new approaches.

Still occasionally failing.

In fact, failure often seems to be part of the process.

Not because they enjoy it.

Because they accept it as tuition.

Every meaningful skill demands payment.

The currency is usually time, effort, patience, frustration, and repetition.

Musashi understood this.

No one becomes skilled accidentally.

No one becomes wise accidentally.

No one develops judgment accidentally.

Training creates capability.

Capability creates confidence.

Confidence creates freedom.

That sequence matters.

Many people want confidence first.

Life usually provides it last.

A child learns to ride a bicycle by riding.

A musician gains confidence by practicing.

A writer gains confidence by writing.

An artist gains confidence by creating.

The confidence is earned through repetition.

Not granted in advance.

The same principle applies well beyond obvious skills.

Patience can be trained.

Listening can be trained.

Discernment can be trained.

Emotional control can be trained.

Kindness can be trained.

Even courage can be trained.

Not in giant heroic moments.

In small daily decisions.

One of the reasons I find Musashi's ideas so appealing is that they place responsibility where it belongs.

On practice.

Not talent.

Not luck.

Not circumstances.

Practice.

That does not mean circumstances do not matter.

Of course they do.

But practice remains available even when circumstances are difficult.

Perhaps especially then.

Several years ago, I found myself learning things I had never expected to learn.

Video production.

YouTube strategy.

Documentary storytelling.

Artificial intelligence.

Book creation.

Website development.

Social media.

Many of these subjects were not even on my radar earlier in life.

Had I decided I was "too old" to learn them, none of the projects that followed would have existed.

No channel.

No documentaries.

No books.

No collaborations with artists.

No ongoing adventure.

Fortunately, life does not ask our permission before presenting opportunities to learn.

It simply places them in front of us.

The question becomes:

Will we remain students?

Or will we quietly retire from learning?

This question matters because learning does more than build skills.

It changes our relationship with the future.

People who stop learning often begin looking backward.

Their greatest experiences become memories.

Their greatest achievements become history.

Nothing new is expected.

Nothing new is pursued.

The future becomes smaller.

Learning reverses that process.

A person learning something new automatically possesses a future.

There is a next lesson.

A next improvement.

A next discovery.

A next challenge.

Learning creates forward momentum.

That may explain why so many vibrant older adults remain deeply curious.

Not because they are trying to compete with younger people.

Because curiosity keeps life interesting.

I once noticed something while interviewing artists.

Many of them became more animated when discussing what they were planning than when discussing what they had already completed.

The future energized them.

The next project mattered.

The next experiment mattered.

The next possibility mattered.

The work was not finished.

Neither were they.

I suspect this applies to far more than art.

It applies to life itself.

One of the misconceptions about aging is that growth eventually stops.

The research suggests otherwise.

People continue learning, adapting, improving, and developing well into later life. In many cases, continued learning is associated with stronger engagement, greater resilience, and better overall functioning.

That finding should encourage us.

It certainly encourages me.

Because it means that becoming is not reserved for youth.

It remains available.

The form simply changes.

The twenty-year-old may be training for a career.

The forty-year-old may be training for leadership.

The sixty-year-old may be training for wisdom.

The seventy-year-old may be training for mentorship.

The eighty-year-old may be training for acceptance.

The subject changes.

The training continues.

Another lesson Musashi offers is that training should become part of ordinary life.

Not an occasional event.

Not something we visit when convenient.

A way of being.

I have found that principle remarkably useful.

The most meaningful improvements in my life rarely came from dramatic breakthroughs.

They came from repetition.

Showing up.

Doing the work.

Trying again.

Learning one small thing.

Then another.

Then another.

The results often appeared much later.

That is the nature of training.

You rarely see the benefit immediately.

You trust the process.

You continue anyway.

And eventually you discover that you have become someone slightly different than before.

A little wiser.

A little calmer.

A little more capable.

A little more grounded.

One day the difference becomes obvious.

Not because of a single effort.

Because of hundreds of small ones.

Perhaps that is the real lesson.

The purpose of training is not perfection.

It is transformation.

Not dramatic transformation.

Gradual transformation.

The kind that happens so slowly you barely notice it until you look back.

And realize how far you have traveled.

Everything meaningful I have learned rests on the same foundation.

The willingness to continue practicing.

To return to the work.

To make one small improvement.

Then another.

Not because perfection is waiting at the end.

Because practice keeps transformation alive.

The way is still in training.

And as long as the training continues, so does the journey.



Chapter 7

Becoming a Beginner Again

There are few words more intimidating to adults than beginner.

Children seem comfortable with it.

Adults often are not.

Children expect to be inexperienced.

Adults expect competence.

Somewhere along the way, many of us begin believing that not knowing something is embarrassing.

That belief quietly limits our lives.

Especially as we grow older.

When we are young, beginning is expected.

Nobody is surprised when a child struggles to ride a bicycle.

Nobody criticizes a teenager learning to drive.

Nobody expects a first-time painter, musician, or writer to be an expert.

Yet something curious happens later in life.

People begin avoiding experiences where they might appear inexperienced.

The desire to preserve competence becomes stronger than the desire to grow.

The cost can be enormous.

Because every new chapter begins with beginnerhood.

Every skill.

Every craft.

Every friendship.

Every technology.

Every adventure.

Every meaningful transformation.

Always begins at the same place.

The beginning.

One of the greatest gifts Jonathan Livingston Seagull offers readers is permission.

Permission to keep learning.

Permission to remain curious.

Permission to look foolish while pursuing something meaningful.

Jonathan repeatedly leaves the safety of what he already knows in order to explore what he does not.

The flock views this as strange.

Sometimes irresponsible.

Sometimes foolish.

Jonathan continues anyway.

Not because he knows he will succeed.

Because he cannot resist discovering what is possible.

That spirit becomes increasingly valuable later in life.

Not less.

One of the most common phrases I hear from people is:

"I wish I had started sooner."

I understand the sentiment.

Most of us do.

But there is a hidden assumption inside that statement.

It assumes that because we did not start earlier, starting now has somehow become pointless.

I have never found that logic convincing.

If something is worth learning, why would today's date make it worthless?

The reality is that many remarkable journeys begin later than people imagine.

Grandma Moses did not begin painting seriously until her late seventies.

Countless writers, artists, entrepreneurs, volunteers, teachers, and mentors discovered entirely new paths after retirement.

The question is not:

"Why didn't I start twenty years ago?"

The more useful question is:

"What happens if I start now?"

That question contains possibility.

The first contains regret.

Possibility generally produces better results.

I have experienced this firsthand.

There are numerous things I now spend time doing that were not part of my life a decade ago.

Creating books.

Building a YouTube channel.

Learning the intricacies of video production.

Working with artists.

Exploring artificial intelligence.

Developing documentaries.

Had someone described these activities to me years earlier, I might have been skeptical.

Life rarely reveals its full map in advance.

Most of the interesting roads appear only after we begin walking.

That is one reason beginners often make unexpected discoveries.

They are moving.

Experts possess knowledge.

Beginners possess momentum.

Both have value.

One of the great dangers of expertise is certainty.

The expert sometimes knows too much.

Or at least believes they do.

The beginner remains open.

Observant.

Curious.

Willing to experiment.

Willing to fail.

But beginnerhood asks for more than curiosity.

It asks us to be seen before we are competent.

To ask questions we think we should already know the answers to.

To make awkward first attempts.

To risk being compared with people who began years earlier.

That is often the part adults resist.

Not learning itself.

Exposure.

A beginner cannot hide behind mastery.

For a while, uncertainty remains visible.

I have felt that discomfort each time I entered unfamiliar territory.

Creating my first videos.

Building a YouTube channel.

Learning new technology.

Beginning a book.

None of those things began with confidence.

Confidence came later.

The courage was not knowing that I would succeed.

It was allowing myself not to know.

That may be the real gift of beginnerhood.

It gives us permission to be unfinished.

Once we accept that, awkwardness becomes less threatening.

It becomes evidence that we have stepped beyond the borders of what we already know.

And remembering that vulnerability does something else.

It makes us kinder to those who are beginning after us.

One of the more subtle benefits of becoming a beginner again is that it creates empathy.

When we struggle to learn something new, we remember what learning feels like.

We remember uncertainty.

We remember frustration.

We remember vulnerability.

This makes us better teachers.

Better mentors.

Better listeners.

Better human beings.

People who remember beginnerhood often treat beginners kindly.

People who forget it sometimes become impatient.

I have seen this countless times while watching artists teach.

The best instructors remember exactly what it felt like not to know.

They guide rather than judge.

Encourage rather than criticize.

Support rather than intimidate.

That memory matters.

It keeps experience from hardening into impatience.

It reminds us that what feels obvious now was once difficult.

And it allows whatever wisdom we have gained to be offered with kindness rather than superiority.

There is another benefit to beginnerhood that deserves mention.

Hope.

Every new skill contains possibility.

Every new project contains possibility.

Every new friendship contains possibility.

Every new chapter contains possibility.

The future becomes larger whenever we decide to learn something.

A person who has something new to learn automatically has something to look forward to.

That may explain why curiosity appears repeatedly throughout this book.

Curiosity keeps the future open.

The shrinking life closes doors.

Curiosity opens them.

One question says:

"I already know."

The other asks:

"What else is possible?"

Those questions lead to very different futures. If there is one idea I hope you carry from this chapter, it is this:

You are not required to become an expert. You are only required to begin.

Small beginnings have launched remarkable journeys.

Many of the most meaningful experiences of my life began with uncertainty.

A camera I barely understood. A conversation with an artist.

A project that seemed beyond my abilities.

A technology that felt unfamiliar.

A book idea that appeared ridiculous.

The first step was rarely impressive.

It was simply a step.

Perhaps there is something you have been postponing.

A skill.

A hobby.

A class.

A creative pursuit.

A volunteer role.

A dream.

A conversation.

A new direction.

If so, consider this your invitation.

Not to master it.

Not to guarantee success.

Simply to become a beginner.

Again.

Because the willingness to begin may be one of the most powerful forms of courage available to us.

And as long as we remain willing to begin, life retains the ability to surprise us.



Chapter 8

Creativity Is Not a Luxury

For many years, I thought creativity belonged to artists.

Painters.

Musicians.

Writers.

Sculptors.

Photographers.

People who possessed some mysterious gift that the rest of us admired from a distance.

Then life taught me otherwise.

Creativity is not a profession.

It is a human capacity.

Artists simply happen to use it more visibly.

The rest of us often use it without noticing.

A gardener designing a flower bed is being creative.

A grandparent inventing games for grandchildren is being creative.

A volunteer solving a community problem is being creative.

A cook adapting a recipe is being creative.

A business owner finding a better way to serve customers is being creative.

A retiree building a meaningful life after leaving a career is being creative.

Creativity is not limited to paintbrushes and pianos.

It is the ability to bring something into existence that did not exist before.

An idea.

A solution.

A relationship.

A story.

A project.

A life.

That last one may be the most important.

Because whether we realize it or not, all of us are engaged in the creative act of building a life.

The older I get, the more I appreciate creativity—not because it produces beautiful things, although it often does.

I appreciate it because it keeps people alive inside.

There is a difference between existing and engaging.

Creativity encourages engagement.

It asks questions.

Explores possibilities.

Invites curiosity.

Rewards attention.

Demands presence.

When people create something, they become participants rather than spectators.

And participation matters.

I have spent years filming artists.

Watching them work.

Listening to them think out loud.

Observing the strange dance between intention and discovery.

One thing I noticed early on is that many artists do not seem particularly concerned with perfection.

At least not the good ones.

They are more interested in exploration.

A painting begins one way and ends another.

A sculpture reveals something unexpected.

A watercolor develops a personality of its own.

The artist responds.

Adjusts.

Experiments.

Continues.

Life itself often works that way.

We begin with one plan.

Reality introduces another.

Creativity helps us adapt.

This may be one reason creativity becomes increasingly valuable later in life.

The terrain changes.

Plans change.

Roles change.

Circumstances change.

Creative people tend to adapt more gracefully because they are accustomed to working with uncertainty.

They understand that not everything unfolds according to a blueprint.

They know how to improvise.

How to experiment.

How to begin again.

Research increasingly suggests that creative activities contribute to healthy aging in numerous ways. Creativity supports engagement, learning, emotional expression, identity, purpose, and social connection. It gives people reasons to remain involved with life.

That finding does not surprise me.

I have witnessed it too many times.

I have met artists in their seventies and eighties who remain deeply engaged with life.

Not because everything is easy.

Not because they are immune to loss.

Not because they have discovered some secret.

Because they continue creating.

The next painting matters.

The next idea matters.

The next possibility matters.

Creation gives them a future.

One of the saddest misconceptions about aging is the belief that creativity belongs to youth.

As though imagination somehow expires.

As though curiosity has an expiration date.

As though inspiration quietly retires at sixty-five.

Reality suggests otherwise.

Some of the most original work produced by artists, writers, thinkers, and creators emerges later in life.

Experience contributes something youth cannot.

Perspective.

Patience.

Depth.

Context.

The younger creator often asks:

"What can I accomplish?"

The older creator may ask:

"What can I express?"

Both questions matter.

The second often carries greater emotional weight.

Creativity also offers something increasingly rare in modern life.

Attention.

Real attention.

The kind that asks us to slow down.

Observe.

Notice.

Become absorbed.

Modern life encourages distraction.

Creativity encourages focus.

Whether painting, writing, gardening, woodworking, photography, cooking, quilting, or music, the process pulls us into the present moment.

The mind stops wandering.

The noise softens.

Something important happens.

We become fully engaged.

Many people spend years searching for happiness while overlooking engagement.

The two are not identical.

Happiness comes and goes.

Engagement has staying power.

A person deeply engaged in meaningful work often experiences something richer than happiness.

They experience fulfillment.

This is one reason I believe creativity should not be viewed as an optional luxury.

It is not merely entertainment.

It is nourishment.

Not for the body.

For the spirit.

Some readers may be thinking:

"That sounds wonderful, but I'm not creative."

Whenever I hear someone say that, I immediately become suspicious.

Not of them.

Of the definition.

Usually what they mean is:

"I don't paint."

Or:

"I don't draw."

Or:

"I don't play music."

Creativity is much larger than artistic skill.

Have you solved problems?

Adapted to changing circumstances?

Raised children?

Built a career?

Started over?

Learned something difficult?

Maintained relationships?

Created traditions?

Supported a community?

Then you have already been creative.

You may simply have been calling it something else.

One of the great privileges of working with artists has been watching ordinary people rediscover creativity.

I have seen individuals who were convinced they lacked artistic ability surprise themselves.

Not because they became famous painters.

Because they gave themselves permission to explore.

Permission is often the missing ingredient.

Children create freely.

Adults frequently seek approval first.

Yet creativity flourishes in permission, not permission slips.

Another lesson artists teach is that outcomes matter less than participation.

A painting does not need to hang in a gallery to be worthwhile.

A story does not need to become a bestseller.

A garden does not need to win awards.

A song does not need a record deal.

The value often lies in the process itself.

The act of making.

The act of learning.

The act of engaging.

The act of becoming.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull understood this beautifully.

Jonathan did not pursue flight because it was practical.

He pursued it because he loved it.

Because it called to him.

Because something inside him came alive while doing it.

That matters.

Especially later in life.

Many people spend decades doing what is necessary.

Supporting families.

Meeting obligations.

Building careers.

Paying bills.

There is honor in those responsibilities.

But eventually some people discover a new question.

Not:

"What must I do?"

But:

"What brings me alive?"

Creativity often lives near the answer.

The form varies from person to person.

For one individual, it may be painting.

For another, writing.

For another, woodworking.

For another, mentoring.

For another, storytelling.

For another, building a community.

The specific activity matters less than the engagement it creates.

I have come to believe that creativity matters because it leaves evidence.

Something exists because we were here.

A story was told.

A garden was planted.

A meal was prepared.

A photograph was taken.

A problem was solved.

A tradition was created.

A life was shaped with intention.

None of these things needs to be extraordinary.

They only need to be made.

Creation is our response to the world.

We encounter something—a need, an idea, an empty space, a possibility—and answer by bringing something into existence.

You do not need to be an artist to do that.

You only need to create something.

The scale is irrelevant.

The act is what matters.

Because every act of creation quietly declares something powerful:

I am still here.

I am still engaged.

I am still becoming.

And as long as those statements remain true, the future remains larger than it first appears.



Chapter 9

The Discipline of Staying Interested

Curiosity is often portrayed as a personality trait.

Something you either have or you don't.

I am not convinced that is true.

The older I get, the more I believe curiosity is a discipline.

A choice.

A habit.

Something that can be strengthened or neglected.

Like a muscle.

This matters because life constantly gives us reasons to stop being interested.

Disappointment.

Loss.

Routine.

Fatigue.

Bad news.

Failed plans.

Repeated frustrations.

Over time, these experiences can quietly narrow our attention.

We become less curious.

Less open.

Less willing to explore.

Not because we consciously decide to.

Because it feels safer.

Predictable.

Comfortable.

The problem is that comfort and curiosity rarely occupy the same territory for long.

Curiosity asks us to move toward the unfamiliar.

Comfort asks us to remain where we are.

Neither is inherently wrong.

But life becomes noticeably different depending on which one we follow most often.

One of the things I have noticed while interviewing artists is that many of them remain deeply interested in things other people stopped noticing years ago.

The way light falls across a wall.

The texture of tree bark.

The shape of a cloud.

The subtle changes in water.

The emotional expression on a face.

The patterns in everyday objects.

What appears ordinary to most people remains fascinating to them.

I do not think this happens because artists are special.

I think it happens because they have trained themselves to pay attention.

Attention is the doorway to curiosity.

You cannot become interested in what you do not notice.

And you cannot notice what you are not paying attention to.

That sounds obvious.

Yet modern life seems almost perfectly designed to pull attention away from the present moment.

Notifications.

Headlines.

Algorithms.

Breaking news.

Social media.

Endless streams of information competing for our focus.

The result is often a strange contradiction.

We know more than ever.

Yet notice less.

We consume enormous amounts of information while paying very little attention.

Curiosity works differently.

Curiosity slows down.

Looks closer.

Asks questions.

Explores.

One of my favorite questions is remarkably simple:

"What is interesting about this?"

Not:

"What is useful?"

Not:

"What does it prove?"

Not:

"How can I benefit?"

Just:

"What is interesting about this?"

That question has opened many unexpected doors.

It has led to conversations.

Projects.

Friendships.

Ideas.

Books.

Videos.

And occasionally entire new directions in life.

Curiosity has a way of rewarding those who follow it.

Not always immediately.

Often years later.

One reason curiosity becomes increasingly important as we age is that it protects against certainty.

Certainty feels satisfying.

Curiosity remains alive.

Certainty says:

"I already know."

Curiosity asks:

"What else might be true?"

Certainty closes the door.

Curiosity leaves it open.

This distinction matters more than many people realize.

Some of the wisest people I have met possess a remarkable ability to remain curious.

Despite decades of experience, they continue asking questions.

They continue learning.

They continue listening.

They remain open to the possibility that they might discover something new.

The opposite can also occur.

Some people become trapped by their own conclusions.

They stop exploring.

Stop learning.

Stop updating their understanding of the world.

Eventually their opinions become more important than reality itself.

Life begins shrinking around those fixed conclusions.

Research increasingly points toward psychological flexibility as one factor associated with psychological health and adaptability in later life. People who remain adaptable and open to learning tend to remain more engaged and resilient throughout later life.

That finding resonates deeply with my own observations.

The people who continue growing are rarely the people who believe they have everything figured out.

They remain students.

Not because they lack knowledge.

Because they value discovery.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull offers a wonderful example.

Jonathan is never satisfied with what he already knows.

Not because he is restless.

Because he is fascinated.

The possibility of improvement excites him.

The possibility of learning excites him.

The possibility of flight itself excites him.

His curiosity repeatedly carries him beyond limitations that others accept without question.

I suspect many of life's greatest adventures begin this way.

Not with certainty.

With curiosity.

Someone wonders what might happen if they try.

A new hobby.

A new friendship.

A new project.

A new skill.

A new chapter.

Curiosity provides the spark.

Action follows.

The older I get, the more I admire people who remain interested.

Not impressed.

Interested.

The distinction matters.

Impressed people often consume.

Interested people participate.

The world contains many impressive things.

Curious people go one step further.

They engage.

They explore.

They ask questions.

They create.

They contribute.

They become involved.

This may explain why curiosity and creativity often travel together.

Both require openness.

Both require attention.

Both require a willingness to venture beyond the familiar.

One feeds the other.

A curious person notices possibilities.

A creative person acts on them.

Together they create momentum.

One of the subtle dangers of aging is that routines can become so familiar they stop being examined.

The same roads.

The same conversations.

The same opinions.

The same habits.

The same assumptions.

Routine itself is not the problem.

Routine can provide stability.

The problem occurs when routine replaces awareness.

When life shifts onto autopilot.

Curiosity interrupts that process.

It asks:

"What am I missing?"

"What have I overlooked?"

"What have I stopped noticing?"

These questions often reveal surprising answers.

I have experienced this repeatedly while filming artists.

What began as a simple effort to document creative processes gradually evolved into something much larger.

The channel became an exploration of people.

Stories.

Purpose.

Creativity.

Aging.

Legacy.

Community.

Had I approached every interview already convinced I knew what I would learn, much of that discovery would have been lost.

Fortunately, curiosity kept opening doors.

Not every door led somewhere important.

Many didn't.

That is part of the process.

Curiosity is not efficient.

It is exploratory.

Sometimes the path leads nowhere.

Sometimes it changes your life.

You rarely know in advance.

That uncertainty discourages some people.

It energizes others.

Curiosity does not always lead somewhere important.

That is not its failure.

Its gift is that it keeps us looking.

One of the simplest questions we can ask ourselves is:

“What am I curious about these days?”

If the answer comes quickly, follow it.

If the answer requires some thought, do not treat that as criticism.

Treat it as an invitation.

To look more closely.

To notice what has become familiar.

To listen without already knowing what someone will say.

To ask one more question.

To follow one small thread simply because it interests you.

The discipline of staying interested is really the discipline of paying attention.

The world has not stopped containing interesting people, ideas, stories, and possibilities.

Sometimes we have simply stopped looking closely enough to see them.

Attention opens the door again.

And perhaps that is reason enough to keep asking questions.



Chapter 10

Body as Platform

There is an old saying that a healthy person has many wishes, while an unhealthy person has only one.

The older I get, the more wisdom I find in that observation.

When we are young, it is easy to take the body for granted.

Most of us do.

The body simply shows up every day and does what we ask of it.

We walk.

Lift.

Carry.

Travel.

Work.

Play.

Recover.

Repeat.

For many years, it feels almost limitless.

Then, gradually, reality begins introducing reminders.

Recovery takes longer.

Energy fluctuates more.

Old injuries reappear.

Sleep becomes more important.

The body starts asking for attention.

Not because it is failing.

Because it is communicating.

This chapter is not about achieving a perfect physique.

It is not about looking younger.

It is not about pretending age does not exist.

In fact, one of the themes of this book has been accepting reality rather than fighting it.

The reality is that our bodies change.

The question becomes:

How do we respond?

Before going further, one distinction matters.

Not every change in the body is the result of neglect.

And not every limitation can be overcome through discipline.

Illness, disability, injury, genetics, grief, caregiving, and circumstances can alter the platform despite our best efforts.

Stewardship is not blame.

It is the practice of meeting the body we actually have with attention, respect, and whatever care is realistically available.

Sometimes strengthening is possible.

Sometimes adaptation is the wiser form of strength.

Sometimes the task is simply to stop treating limitation as failure.

One of the mistakes I have observed is that people often treat health as an isolated category of life.

Something separate.

A box to be checked.

An obligation.

A chore.

I have gradually come to see it differently.

Health is not the purpose.

It is the platform.

The platform supports the purpose.

That distinction matters.

Most people do not wake up in the morning excited about maintaining their blood pressure.

They become excited about visiting grandchildren.

Traveling.

Creating art.

Writing books.

Volunteering.

Gardening.

Building projects.

Helping others.

Living.

The body allows those things to happen.

The stronger the platform, the greater the freedom.

The weaker the platform, the narrower the possibilities.

This is one reason physical stewardship becomes increasingly important with age.

Not because life becomes less meaningful.

Because life remains meaningful.

We still have places to go.

People to help.

Things to learn.

Experiences to enjoy.

Contributions to make.

The mission continues.

The platform supports the mission.

One of the interesting discoveries in healthy aging research is how often physical activity appears.

Again and again, physical activity is associated with better health and functioning later in life.

Not extreme athletic achievement. Simply movement. Walking, activity, balance, strength, and maintaining physical engagement with the world.

I find that encouraging.

But movement means different things on different terrain.

For one person, it may be a walk.

For another, stretching, gardening, water exercise, physiotherapy, moving from a chair, or simply doing a little more within the body's present limits.

The measure is not comparison with anyone else.

Not even with a younger version of ourselves.

It is participation where participation is possible.

Sometimes care means movement.

Sometimes it means rest.

Treatment.

Adaptation.

Accepting assistance.

Listening when the body asks us to stop.

The goal is not perfection.

The goal is to preserve as much freedom and possibility as the present platform allows.

Small acts of care accumulate.

One choice at a time.

One day at a time.

I have seen this firsthand through dragon boating.

One of the things I love about the sport is that it quietly demonstrates a truth many people forget.

Improvement remains possible.

The paddlers are not all twenty years old.

Many are decades beyond that.

Yet they continue improving.

Learning.

Adjusting.

Training.

Working together.

The goal is not to become younger.

The goal is to become better.

That distinction applies far beyond sports.

Many frustrations arise when people compare themselves to younger versions of themselves.

The comparison is understandable.

It is also often unfair.

The twenty-five-year-old body and the sixty-five-year-old body are different platforms.

Different terrain.

Different capabilities.

Different limitations.

The question is not:

"Can I do everything I once did?"

The more useful question is:

"What can I do with the platform I have today?"

That question creates possibilities.

The first often creates disappointment.

One of the lessons age eventually teaches is that maintenance matters.

This is true of relationships.

Homes.

Vehicles.

Tools.

Gardens.

And bodies.

Neglect accumulates.

So does care.

Neither arrives all at once.

The results appear gradually.

One choice at a time.

One habit at a time.

One day at a time.

Another aspect of physical stewardship that deserves attention is energy.

Many people focus entirely on longevity.

I find myself increasingly interested in vitality.

Not merely how long life lasts.

How fully it can be lived.

There is a difference.

A person may technically have free time but lack the energy to enjoy it.

Energy expands possibilities.

Fatigue contracts them.

This is why sleep, movement, nutrition, stress management, and recovery matter.

Not because they are exciting topics.

Because they influence everything else.

Purpose requires energy.

Creativity requires energy.

Learning requires energy.

Contribution requires energy.

Relationships require energy.

The body quietly supports them all.

One of the most valuable mindset shifts I have experienced is moving from criticism to stewardship.

Many people maintain an adversarial relationship with their bodies.

They criticize them.

Fight them.

Compare them.

Resent them.

Especially as aging becomes more visible.

Stewardship feels different.

A steward cares for something valuable.

Not because it is perfect.

Because it is important.

The body deserves that kind of respect.

Not worship.

Not obsession.

Respect.

After all, it has carried us through every experience we have ever had.

Every friendship.

Every adventure.

Every challenge.

Every triumph.

Every heartbreak.

Every lesson.

It has been there through all of it.

That seems worthy of gratitude.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull viewed flight as both freedom and discipline.

The freedom came from capability.

The capability came from practice.

Life often works the same way.

Freedom is rarely accidental.

It is usually supported by preparation.

A strong body provides options.

A capable body provides independence.

A cared-for body provides opportunity.

Not guarantees.

Opportunities.

That is enough.

There is another reason physical stewardship matters.

It can support a sense of agency.

But agency is not the same as complete independence.

Sometimes agency means doing something for ourselves.

Sometimes it means choosing assistance.

Adapting a plan.

Accepting treatment.

Changing expectations. Deciding where our limited energy matters most.

A body may lose capability without a person losing dignity, identity, or value.

That distinction matters. The people I admire most do not make health the centre of life.

They meet the platform honestly. They care for it where they can.

They adapt where they must. Then they return their attention to living.

That seems wise.

Health is important.

But it is not the destination.

It is the vehicle.

The platform.

The support structure.

The foundation beneath the life we wish to build.

Perhaps that is the lesson.

Care for the platform.

Respect it.

Strengthen it where possible.

Adapt when necessary.

Accept its changing nature.

Then use it.

Use it to learn.

Use it to create.

Use it to help.

Use it to explore.

Use it to love.

Use it to contribute.

Because the purpose of maintaining the platform is not maintenance itself.

It is the life the platform makes possible.

And as long as there is meaningful work left to do, meaningful people left to love, and meaningful experiences left to have, the platform remains worth caring for.

Part III

Free Flight



Chapter 11

Freedom for What?

Freedom is one of those words everyone seems to like.

Politicians use it.

Advertisers use it.

Businesses use it.

Movements use it.

Almost nobody argues against it.

Yet when you ask people what freedom actually means, the answers become surprisingly unclear.

Freedom from work.

Freedom from debt.

Freedom from obligations.

Freedom from responsibility.

Freedom from rules.

Freedom from limitations.

Many of these things have value.

But over the years I have come to believe that freedom is often misunderstood.

Most people spend their lives thinking about freedom from.

Far fewer spend time considering freedom for.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull revolves around this distinction.

Jonathan does not seek freedom simply to escape the flock.

If escape were the goal, the story would end very quickly.

Instead, freedom allows him to pursue something.

Growth.

Mastery.

Discovery.

Learning.

Becoming.

The freedom matters because of what it makes possible.

This distinction changed the way I think about many areas of life.

Retirement provides a good example.

Many people spend decades working toward freedom from employment.

And understandably so.

Work can be demanding.

Stressful.

Exhausting.

The dream of freedom often becomes a powerful motivator.

Then retirement arrives.

Freedom is achieved.

A surprising question follows:

Now what?

The answer matters more than many people realize.

Because freedom by itself is not purpose.

Freedom creates space.

Purpose determines what fills it.

Without purpose, freedom can become surprisingly empty.

Without direction, freedom can drift.

Without engagement, freedom can slowly transform into passivity.

The research we explored earlier hinted at this repeatedly.

People tend to thrive not merely because they possess freedom, but because they use it in meaningful ways. Purpose, contribution, learning, relationships, and engagement consistently appear as protective factors later in life.

That observation feels important.

Especially in a culture that often treats freedom as the ultimate destination.

Freedom is valuable.

But it is not the finish line.

It is the starting line.

One of the reasons I find Jonathan Livingston Seagull so compelling is that Jonathan repeatedly uses freedom as an opportunity to grow.

The flock seeks comfort.

Jonathan seeks capability.

The flock seeks conformity.

Jonathan seeks understanding.

The flock asks:

"Why?"

Jonathan asks:

"Why not?"

There is something deeply human about that difference.

Many people assume growth belongs primarily to youth.

Jonathan quietly rejects that idea.

Growth belongs to the curious.

Regardless of age.

The older I get, the less interested I become in freedom as escape.

And the more interested I become in freedom as opportunity.

Opportunity to learn.

Opportunity to create.

Opportunity to contribute.

Opportunity to spend time on what matters most.

Opportunity to align life more closely with values.

This perspective changes the conversation.

Instead of asking:

"What am I trying to get away from?"

We begin asking:

"What am I trying to move toward?"

That question tends to produce better answers.

And often better lives.

One of the interesting things about purpose is that it rarely arrives fully formed.

Most people seem to expect a dramatic revelation.

A lightning bolt.

A moment of certainty.

Life often works differently.

Purpose tends to emerge through engagement.

We try things.

Explore.

Learn.

Contribute.

Pay attention.

Gradually patterns appear.

The things that energize us.

The things that matter.

The things we would gladly continue doing even if nobody applauded.

Purpose often reveals itself through participation.

Not contemplation alone.

This realization helped me greatly.

There have been periods in my life when I thought I needed a perfect plan before moving forward.

Experience taught me otherwise.

Movement often creates clarity.

Action often reveals direction.

The future rarely provides complete instructions.

It provides opportunities.

We respond.

We learn.

We adjust.

The path becomes visible while walking it.

Freedom plays an important role in that process.

Not because it removes uncertainty.

Because it allows exploration.

A person trapped by circumstances has fewer choices.

A person with some freedom possesses more.

The challenge becomes using that freedom wisely.

This is where discipline and freedom unexpectedly become partners.

Most people view them as opposites.

I do not.

Discipline creates capability.

Capability creates freedom.

A musician practices scales for years.

The result is freedom.

An artist develops technique.

The result is freedom.

A writer develops skill.

The result is freedom.

The same principle applies throughout life.

Preparation expands possibilities.

Neglect narrows them.

Musashi understood this.

Jonathan understood this.

Perhaps that is why both remain relevant.

One emphasized discipline.

The other emphasized freedom.

Together they reveal something important.

The highest form of freedom is not the absence of effort.

It is the ability to direct effort toward what matters most.

One of the more surprising discoveries of later life is that freedom often becomes less about ourselves.

And more about others.

This was not something I expected.

When I was younger, freedom seemed primarily personal.

My goals.

My ambitions.

My opportunities.

Over time the perspective shifted.

Now I increasingly think about freedom in terms of contribution.

How can I help?

How can I encourage?

How can I support?

How can I preserve something valuable?

How can I leave things slightly better than I found them?

The answers vary.

But the direction feels meaningful.

Perhaps this is one of the natural evolutions of adulthood.

The focus gradually moves outward.

Not entirely.

But increasingly.

Freedom becomes less about doing whatever we want.

And more about having the opportunity to do what matters.

One of the most inspiring people I have met are not necessarily the freest in a conventional sense.

They still have responsibilities.

Obligations.

Limitations.

Challenges.

Yet they possess something deeper.

Alignment.

Their lives reflect their values.

Their actions support their purpose.

Their time flows toward things that matter.

That is a form of freedom worth pursuing.

The world often tells us that freedom means having no constraints.

Reality suggests otherwise.

Every meaningful life contains constraints.

Health.

Finances.

Geography.

Family.

Responsibilities.

Time itself.

The question is not whether constraints exist.

The question is how we respond to them.

Jonathan never escaped gravity.

He learned to work with it.

Life asks something similar of us.

Not escape from reality.

Mastery within reality.

One of the simplest exercises I can recommend is this:

Complete the sentence:

"I want more freedom so that I can..."

The ending matters.

Very often it reveals what we truly value.

Travel.

Create.

Volunteer.

Teach.

Write.

Spend time with family.

Learn.

Build.

Serve.

Whatever appears after those words deserves attention.

Because it may be pointing toward purpose.

Freedom becomes meaningful when it serves something larger than itself.

Otherwise it risks becoming another form of drift.

As we move deeper into this final section of the book, we will spend more time exploring contribution, mentoring, wisdom, and legacy.

But all of them begin here.

With a simple shift in perspective.

Not:

Freedom from what?

But:

Freedom for what?

The answer may become one of the most important discoveries of your life.



Chapter 12

Why Contribution Beats Consumption

If I could leave only one idea behind from this book, it might be this chapter.

Not because I am completely certain it is true.

But because life keeps presenting evidence that it might be.

The idea is simple.

Contribution tends to produce a deeper satisfaction than consumption.

That statement is not an argument against enjoyment.

It is not an argument against leisure.

It is not an argument against rest.

All of those things have value.

The question is not whether consumption has a place.

The question is whether it is enough.

My experience suggests it isn't.

Most people have experienced this firsthand.

Think about the difference between watching a beautiful garden and growing one.

The difference between reading a story and writing one.

The difference between attending a community event and helping organize it.

The difference between receiving encouragement and offering it.

Both sides have value.

But they do not feel the same.

One receives.

The other participates.

One consumes.

The other contributes.

Something important happens when we contribute.

We become part of the story.

Many years ago, I assumed that satisfaction would come primarily from achievement.

Goals reached.

Milestones achieved.

Success accumulated.

Like many people, I spent a great deal of time focused on accomplishment.

There is nothing wrong with accomplishment.

Achievement can be rewarding.

But I eventually noticed something.

The satisfaction rarely lasted as long as expected.

A goal would be reached.

A success achieved.

A problem solved.

For a brief period, it felt significant.

Then life moved on.

The horizon shifted.

The next objective appeared.

The cycle repeated.

Over time I became more interested in a different question.

Not:

"What can I achieve?"

But:

"What can I contribute?"

That question changed the direction of my attention.

Achievement often focuses inward.

Contribution tends to focus outward.

Achievement asks:

"What can I get?"

Contribution asks:

"What can I give?"

Both questions matter.

One simply seems more durable.

The research we explored earlier repeatedly pointed toward this conclusion.

People who remain engaged through volunteering, mentoring, teaching, creating, helping, and contributing often experience stronger purpose and greater overall well-being. Contribution appears closely connected to meaning.

That finding resonates deeply with my own observations.

The most fulfilled older adults I know are rarely focused entirely on themselves.

They are focused on something larger.

A family.

A community.

A cause.

A craft.

A project.

A person.

A purpose.

Their attention flows outward.

And in doing so, they seem to receive something in return.

Not money.

Not status.

Meaning.

Meaning is difficult to measure.

Yet most of us recognize it when we encounter it.

Meaning has a different quality than pleasure.

Pleasure feels good.

Meaning feels worthwhile.

The distinction matters.

Pleasure often fades quickly.

Meaning lingers.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull offers an interesting example.

The story changes dramatically when Jonathan begins teaching others.

Up until that point, his journey is largely personal.

He seeks mastery.

Freedom.

Understanding.

Growth.

All valuable pursuits.

Yet the story deepens when he begins helping others discover those same possibilities.

His learning becomes contribution.

His freedom becomes service.

His growth becomes mentorship.

Something larger emerges.

I have often observed the same pattern in real life.

Artists who teach.

Craftspeople who mentor.

Grandparents who share wisdom.

Volunteers who support their communities.

Retirees who devote time to helping others.

The act of contributing seems to transform the experience itself.

The work becomes about more than the individual.

Perhaps this explains why so many traditional wisdom traditions eventually emphasize service.

Not because self-development is unimportant.

Because self-development often reaches its fullest expression through contribution.

Knowledge shared becomes wisdom.

Skill shared becomes mentorship.

Experience shared becomes guidance.

Love shared becomes connection.

One of the more rewarding discoveries of adulthood is how meaningful it can feel to be of practical help.

Not in dramatic ways.

In ordinary ones.

Helping someone solve a problem.

Offering encouragement.

Teaching a skill.

Being dependable.

Showing up.

These things rarely make headlines.

Yet they consistently appear in meaningful lives.

I have seen this repeatedly through Process Art Discovery.

When I first began filming artists, I was primarily interested in learning.

The more interviews I conducted, the more I realized something else was happening.

The videos were preserving knowledge.

Preserving stories.

Preserving experiences.

Preserving wisdom.

The work became larger than content creation.

It became contribution.

Not because the channel is huge.

Because it preserves and shares something that matters.

That distinction matters.

A small contribution can still matter deeply.

Modern culture often confuses significance with scale.

We imagine that contribution must be large to matter.

History suggests otherwise.

Most lives are changed through small acts repeated consistently.

A teacher encouraging a student.

A neighbor helping a neighbor.

A volunteer giving time.

A mentor offering guidance.

A parent showing patience.

A friend listening.

These actions rarely appear in history books.

Yet they shape countless lives.

One of the traps of modern life is endless consumption.

There has never been more available to consume.

Videos.

News.

Entertainment.

Products.

Opinions.

Information.

The stream never ends.

Consumption itself is not the problem.

The imbalance can be.

A life devoted entirely to consumption often becomes strangely hollow.

The next video.

The next purchase.

The next distraction.

The next headline.

Temporary satisfaction.

Little lasting meaning.

Contribution changes the equation.

Contribution creates investment.

Responsibility.

Participation.

Connection.

The world becomes something we help shape rather than merely observe.

This may be one reason contribution protects against the shrinking life.

The shrinking life often turns people into spectators.

Contribution keeps them engaged.

Participants.

Builders.

Teachers.

Helpers.

Creators.

Mentors.

The role matters less than the involvement.

One of the things I admire most about older adults who remain vibrant is that they continue finding ways to contribute.

Not because they are forced to.

Because they choose to.

Sometimes the contribution is large.

Often it is small.

A conversation.

A volunteer role.

A piece of advice.

A creative project.

A family tradition.

A story preserved.

A hand extended.

The common thread is connection through contribution.

Something is offered.

And both lives may become a little richer because of it.

Perhaps that is the hidden secret.

Contribution is not self-sacrifice in the way many people imagine.

Done properly, contribution enriches both the giver and the receiver.

Not equally.

Not always immediately.

But often enough to matter.

As I look back, many of the moments that feel most meaningful involve contribution rather than consumption.

Helping an artist share their work.

Preserving someone's story.

Encouraging a friend.

Supporting a project.

Creating something that might help another person.

Those experiences remain vivid.

Far more vivid than most things I merely consumed.

That observation may be worth reflecting upon.

What memories stand out most in your own life?

The things you consumed?

Or the things you contributed?

The answer often reveals something important.

We all consume.

We all need rest.

We all need enjoyment.

There is nothing wrong with that.

But if the goal is a meaningful life, I suspect contribution deserves a larger place at the table.

Not because we owe the world.

Because contribution often gives us something consumption cannot.

A reason to get up.

A reason to keep learning.

A reason to stay engaged.

A reason to continue becoming.

And in the end, those reasons may be among the most valuable things we ever possess.



Chapter 13

Someone Still Needs You

There is a quiet fear that many people experience as they grow older.

Few talk about it directly.

Yet it appears in conversations, decisions, worries, and moments of reflection.

The fear is not death.

Not really.

The fear is becoming unnecessary.

No longer needed.

No longer useful.

No longer relevant.

No longer seen.

It is an understandable fear.

Much of life teaches us to measure our value through roles.

Employee.

Manager.

Business owner.

Parent.

Coach.

Provider.

Leader.

Expert.

For decades these roles help organize our lives.

They give structure.

Responsibility.

Identity.

Purpose.

Then life changes.

Careers end.

Children become independent.

Organizations move on.

Communities evolve.

The role that once defined us may gradually disappear.

Many people interpret this as a loss of value.

I believe it is often something else.

A change of role.

The distinction matters.

Because value and role are not the same thing.

One can change while the other remains.

There is another distinction worth making.

Being needed can give life purpose.

But it is not the source of human worth.

A person remains valuable during seasons when they cannot teach, help, create, provide, or care for anyone else.

We do not earn dignity by staying useful.

Contribution is an expression of life.

It is not proof that we deserve a place in it.

That understanding allows us to contribute without turning contribution into another measure of our worth.

A retired teacher may no longer stand in front of a classroom.

That does not mean nobody needs their wisdom.

A retired manager may no longer supervise employees.

That does not mean nobody benefits from their experience.

A grandparent may no longer be raising children.

That does not mean nobody needs their love.

Life continually changes the form of our contribution.

Not necessarily its importance.

I have observed this repeatedly while working with older artists.

Many have spent decades developing skills, insights, techniques, and perspectives.

The value of those lessons does not disappear with age.

In many cases, it increases.

Because experience accumulates.

Perspective deepens.

Wisdom grows.

The challenge is recognizing that others may still benefit from what we have learned.

Even when we no longer hold the title.

One of the most beautiful aspects of human life is that contribution often becomes more valuable as experience increases.

A young person may possess energy.

An older person often possesses perspective.

Both matter.

The world needs both.

Yet modern culture sometimes sends a different message.

It celebrates novelty.

Youth.

Speed.

Innovation.

These things have their place.

But they are only part of the story.

The older I get, the more I appreciate qualities that often arrive later.

Patience.

Discernment.

Judgment.

Perspective.

Restraint.

Understanding.

These qualities rarely appear overnight.

They are usually earned.

Often through difficulty.

Often through mistakes.

Often through years of paying attention.

One reason I enjoy interviewing artists is that I am frequently reminded how much knowledge exists beneath the surface.

A casual conversation may reveal decades of learning.

Lessons about creativity.

Persistence.

Relationships.

Business.

Life.

The person sharing them may not even realize how valuable those lessons are.

They have lived with them so long they seem ordinary.

That happens to all of us.

Our own experience often becomes invisible.

We stop recognizing its value because it feels familiar.

Yet someone else may desperately need the lesson we take for granted.

Someone younger.

Someone struggling.

Someone beginning a journey we have already traveled.

This is one reason mentorship matters.

Not formal mentorship necessarily.

Simply the willingness to share what we have learned.

The willingness to encourage.

Guide.

Support.

Listen.

Offer perspective.

Most wisdom traditions recognized this role.

Across cultures and centuries, elders often served as teachers, storytellers, advisors, guides, and keepers of knowledge. Their value came not from physical strength but from accumulated experience and perspective.

That role remains available today.

The form may differ.

The need does not.

In fact, I sometimes wonder whether modern society needs it more than ever.

We live in an age overflowing with information.

Yet wisdom remains surprisingly scarce.

Information tells us what is happening.

Wisdom helps us understand what matters.

Information can be gathered quickly.

Wisdom usually requires time.

Experience.

Reflection.

Perspective.

Someone still needs that.

Perhaps not everyone.

But someone.

That distinction is important.

Many people become discouraged because they imagine they must influence the world.

Most of us do not need to influence the world.

We need only influence our corner of it.

A family.

A friend.

A student.

A neighbor.

An artist.

A child.

A community.

One person.

Sometimes one person is enough.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull eventually discovers that his greatest impact does not come from flying alone.

It comes from helping others discover what is possible for themselves.

His freedom becomes meaningful when it begins benefiting others.

The same pattern appears repeatedly in life.

Knowledge reaches its highest value when shared.

Experience reaches its highest value when shared.

Growth reaches its highest value when shared.

Otherwise much of it remains unfinished.

One of the questions I occasionally ask myself is:

"What have I learned that might help someone else?"

The answer is rarely dramatic.

A lesson about patience.

A lesson about creativity.

A lesson about persistence.

A lesson about failure.

A lesson about paying attention.

Small things.

Yet small things often have surprising influence.

I suspect many readers underestimate the value of what they already know.

Not because they lack wisdom.

Because familiarity disguises it.

What feels ordinary to you may be transformative to someone else.

A simple conversation.

A story.

A perspective.

A warning.

An encouragement.

These gifts rarely cost much.

Yet they can change lives.

There is another side to this chapter as well.

Sometimes being needed does not require teaching anything.

Sometimes it simply requires presence.

Showing up.

Listening.

Caring.

Being there.

The older I get, the more I appreciate the power of presence.

Solutions are valuable.

Advice is valuable.

But often people remember kindness long after they forget instructions.

Presence says:

"You matter."

"I see you."

"You are not alone."

Few gifts are more meaningful. Perhaps that is why relationships remain so central to a fulfilling life.

People need people. Always have.

Always will.

The research supports this repeatedly.

Strong social connections are among the most important contributors to well-being, resilience, and healthy aging. Isolation, on the other hand, consistently predicts poorer outcomes.

Somewhere, what you carry may matter.

Your knowledge.

Your encouragement.

Your experience.

Your patience.

Your humor.

Your story.

Your presence.

The invitation is not to prove your usefulness.

It is to recognize what may be offered when you have something to give.

And on the days when you do not, your value does not disappear.

Contribution changes form throughout life.

A teacher may become a mentor.

A worker may become an advisor.

A parent may become a grandparent.

A creator may become a guide.

Sometimes the contribution is wisdom.

Sometimes kindness.

Sometimes allowing another person to help us, and receiving that care with grace.

The role evolves. What we carry remains.

Perhaps that is one of the privileges of later life.

The opportunity to transform experience into service when the opportunity is present.

Not because we are obligated.

Because what feels ordinary to us may still help someone else find their way.

You do not need to save the world.

You do not need to become famous.

You do not need to influence millions.

Offer what you can.

When you can.

Sometimes one person is enough.

And sometimes simply remaining present in the human circle is enough.



Chapter 14

What Time Can Teach

There are some lessons that can be explained.

And there are some lessons that must be lived.

This chapter is about the second kind.

When we are young, knowledge often arrives through instruction.

Parents explain.

Teachers explain.

Books explain.

Mentors explain.

We learn because someone tells us something.

That process remains valuable throughout life.

But eventually experience begins teaching lessons that words alone cannot fully convey.

Patience.

Loss.

Gratitude.

Forgiveness.

Mortality.

Perspective.

These subjects can be discussed.

Understanding them deeply usually requires living through them.

This may be one of the great gifts of age.

Not superior intelligence.

Not greater importance.

Perspective.

Perspective changes the meaning of many things.

A problem that once felt overwhelming becomes manageable.

A setback that once seemed catastrophic becomes a story.

An insult that once provoked anger becomes unimportant.

A success that once seemed essential becomes merely one event among many.

Age changes the scale by which we measure life.

I remember being surprised by this.

When I was younger, many things felt urgent.

Everything seemed important.

Every decision.

Every opportunity.

Every mistake.

Every opinion.

As the years passed, some of those concerns quietly lost their power.

Not because they ceased to matter.

Because they found their proper size.

Perspective often does that.

It restores proportion.

One of the advantages of having lived through multiple decades is that you begin seeing patterns.

Economies rise and fall.

Trends appear and disappear.

Technologies transform the world.

Predictions come and go.

Certainties collapse.

New certainties emerge.

The cycle repeats.

What feels unprecedented is often less unprecedented than it first appears.

Experience does not provide all the answers.

But it frequently provides context.

Context is underrated.

A person with context is less likely to panic.

Less likely to overreact.

Less likely to mistake a temporary storm for the end of the world.

This does not mean older people are automatically wise.

Far from it.

Age and wisdom are related.

They are not identical.

Everyone knows people who have accumulated years without accumulating perspective.

The passage of time alone teaches very little.

Reflection teaches.

Attention teaches.

Humility teaches.

Experience becomes wisdom only when we take time to learn from it.

This may explain why some people seem to grow wiser with age while others merely grow older.

The difference is not experience itself.

Everyone accumulates experience.

The difference is what they do with it.

Do they reflect?

Do they learn?

Do they adjust?

Do they remain curious?

Do they remain open?

Or do they simply repeat the same patterns year after year?

Wisdom appears to require participation.

Not merely survival.

One of the most important lessons age has taught me is that certainty deserves caution.

When I was younger, I often felt more certain than I do now.

I had strong opinions.

Clear conclusions.

Firm beliefs.

Some proved correct.

Many required adjustment.

Experience introduced complexity.

The older I get, the more comfortable I become with nuance.

With uncertainty.

With saying:

"I may be wrong."

That statement once felt like weakness.

Now it feels like strength.

Not because truth does not matter.

Because reality is often more complicated than our first interpretation.

Humility creates room for learning.

Arrogance usually does not.

One of the recurring themes across many wisdom traditions is that genuine wisdom often includes humility.

The wise person understands the limits of their knowledge.

The foolish person often does not.

This observation appears repeatedly across cultures and centuries. Humility, perspective, compassion, patience, and judgment are frequently associated with wisdom.

I find that reassuring.

Because humility becomes easier when we have lived long enough to see how often we have been mistaken.

And all of us have been mistaken.

Many times.

Another lesson age teaches is the value of relationships.

When people are young, they often imagine that happiness will come primarily from achievement.

The promotion.

The house.

The accomplishment.

The milestone.

Again, there is nothing wrong with achievement.

Achievement matters.

But over time many people discover that relationships leave the deepest imprint.

Family.

Friends.

Mentors.

Students.

Colleagues.

Partners.

Neighbors.

The people who shared the journey.

When individuals look back on their lives, they rarely speak first about spreadsheets.

They speak about people.

That observation alone contains a great deal of wisdom.

Age also changes our relationship with time.

A twenty-year-old and an eighty-year-old both understand that time is finite.

One understands it intellectually.

The other understands it personally.

The difference is significant.

Awareness of mortality has a way of clarifying priorities.

Not in a morbid sense.

In a practical sense.

Petty concerns lose importance.

Meaningful relationships gain importance.

Purpose gains importance.

Experiences gain importance.

Gratitude gains importance.

Many wisdom traditions encourage reflection on mortality for precisely this reason. Awareness of life's limits often increases appreciation for what remains.

Strangely enough, contemplating the end can deepen engagement with the present.

Life becomes more precious when we remember it is temporary.

One of the qualities I most admire in wise elders is their ability to distinguish between what matters and what merely appears urgent.

That skill is increasingly valuable.

Modern life excels at manufacturing urgency.

Everything seems immediate.

Everything seems important.

Everything demands attention.

Wisdom quietly asks:

Does it really?

Sometimes the answer is yes.

Often it is not.

This ability to sort signal from noise may be one of the most practical forms of wisdom available.

Another lesson age teaches is acceptance.

Not resignation.

Acceptance.

There is a difference.

Resignation says:

"Nothing can be done."

Acceptance says:

"This is reality. Now what?"

Acceptance sees clearly.

Resignation stops moving.

One creates possibility.

The other closes it.

The distinction becomes increasingly important as life unfolds.

Not every circumstance can be changed.

Not every loss can be reversed.

Not every wish can be fulfilled.

Acceptance allows us to work with reality rather than endlessly arguing against it.

I have encountered remarkable wisdom in people who have lived through limitation, loss, disappointment, and change.

But suffering does not automatically make anyone wiser.

Sometimes it teaches.

Sometimes it exhausts.

Sometimes survival itself requires everything a person has.

No one owes the world a lesson drawn from what hurt them.

When reflection becomes possible, difficulty may eventually reveal perspective, compassion, or strength.

It may also leave questions that never resolve.

Wisdom can include learning from experience.

It can also include acknowledging honestly what the experience took from us.

There is no single correct way to carry what life has given.

Perhaps that is the key phrase.

If we are willing to learn.

Age offers opportunities for wisdom.

It does not guarantee it.

The opportunity remains ours to accept or ignore.

The good news is that wisdom appears capable of growing throughout life.

There is no graduation ceremony.

No final exam.

No moment when we officially become wise.

There is simply the ongoing practice of paying attention.

Reflecting.

Learning.

Adjusting.

Sharing.

Growing.

One lesson at a time.

As I reflect on the artists, mentors, teachers, and elders I most admire, I notice a common trait.

They remain students.

Even after decades of experience.

Perhaps that is the final paradox.

The wisest people often continue learning.

The more they understand, the more they appreciate how much remains to be understood.

That perspective creates gentleness.

Patience.

Curiosity.

Humility.

And perhaps wisdom itself.

The world often celebrates youth for its possibilities.

Age deserves recognition for something equally valuable.

Perspective.

The ability to see farther because we have traveled farther.

The ability to understand more because we have experienced more.

The ability to guide because we have wandered.

That is wisdom's gift.

Not perfection.

Perspective.

And perspective may be one of the most valuable things we ever share.



Chapter 15

The Second Half Is Not the Epilogue

If you have read this far, you may have noticed that this book has never really been about aging.

At least not in the way most people use the word.

It has not been about avoiding wrinkles.

Or extending youth.

Or pretending time does not pass.

Time passes.

We all know that.

The years move forward whether we welcome them or not.

The question has never been whether we age.

The question is how we live while doing so.

That is a very different conversation.

One of the assumptions quietly embedded in modern culture is that life follows a predictable arc.

Youth is the beginning.

Middle age is the peak.

Everything afterward is decline.

The story, we are told, is winding down.

The interesting part is largely over.

What remains is maintenance.

Reflection.

Retirement.

A gradual retreat from center stage.

The older I get, the less convincing I find that story.

Not because decline does not exist.

It does.

Not because limitations do not exist.

They do.

Not because loss does not exist.

It certainly does.

But because the story feels incomplete.

Life continues producing opportunities for growth, contribution, learning, creativity, friendship, service, and meaning long after the supposed peak has passed.

I have seen too much evidence to believe otherwise.

I have met artists creating extraordinary work in their seventies and eighties.

I have met people who discovered entirely new passions after retirement.

I have met mentors whose greatest contributions emerged after their careers ended.

I have met individuals who rebuilt their lives after devastating setbacks.

I have met people who found purpose precisely when they thought their most important chapters were behind them.

None of this fits comfortably into the decline narrative.

Perhaps that narrative needs updating.

One of the lessons that emerges repeatedly from Sun Tzu, Musashi, and Jonathan Livingston Seagull is that life remains dynamic.

The terrain changes.

The training continues.

The possibility of growth remains.

The form evolves.

The journey does not end.

Each of these books reached me at different stages of life.

When I was younger, I saw strategy.

Discipline.

Achievement.

Capability.

As I grew older, I began seeing something else.

Adaptability.

Curiosity.

Purpose.

Contribution.

Freedom.

Wisdom.

The books had not changed.

I had.

And perhaps that is part of the point.

The lessons we need often reveal themselves when we are ready to see them.

One of the most important ideas explored throughout this book is that life tends to expand or contract.

Rarely does it remain still.

The shrinking life moves toward isolation, passivity, certainty, and withdrawal.

The expanding life moves toward curiosity, engagement, contribution, learning, and connection.

Neither direction happens all at once.

Both are built one decision at a time.

One conversation.

One project.

One habit.

One friendship.

One act of courage.

One act of avoidance.

The trajectory matters.

Far more than most people realize.

The encouraging news is that the trajectory can change.

A person can begin expanding again.

At any age.

Perhaps not in every way.

But in meaningful ways.

Curiosity can return.

Friendships can deepen.

Purpose can emerge.

Skills can be learned.

Contributions can be made.

The future can become larger.

That possibility deserves respect.

Throughout this book, we have explored many ideas.

Knowing yourself.

Choosing battles wisely.

Avoiding deception.

Recognizing the shrinking life.

Remaining a student.

Becoming a beginner again.

Creating.

Staying interested.

Caring for the platform.

Understanding freedom.

Contributing.

Mentoring.

Growing wiser.

If I were forced to summarize all of them into a single observation, it might be this:

Stay engaged.

Not busy.

Engaged.

There is a difference.

Busy people often fill their schedules.

Engaged people fill their lives.

Engagement means participation.

Presence.

Curiosity.

Attention.

Purpose.

It means remaining involved with the world rather than merely observing it.

It means continuing to show up.

One of the greatest privileges of working with artists has been watching this principle in action.

Artists understand something many people forget.

The work is never truly finished.

There is always another painting.

Another idea.

Another experiment.

Another possibility.

The canvas remains open.

Life may be more like that than we realize.

The canvas remains open.

Not infinitely.

But longer than many people assume.

One of the recurring themes in Jonathan Livingston Seagull is that limitations are often less fixed than they first appear.

Not all limitations.

Some are real.

Some are unavoidable.

But many exist primarily because nobody has questioned them.

Age carries its own collection of assumptions.

Too old.

Too late.

Too difficult.

Too risky.

Too ambitious.

Too unrealistic.

Sometimes those statements are accurate.

Often they are not.

Wisdom lies in knowing the difference.

One of the gifts of later life is that we become increasingly free to define success for ourselves.

The expectations of others lose some of their influence.

The scoreboard changes.

Many people spend their younger years accumulating.

The second half often invites a different focus.

Contribution.

Meaning.

Connection.

Legacy.

Not necessarily grand legacy.

The kind that appears in history books.

The quieter kind.

A life well lived.

People helped.

Stories preserved.

Lessons shared.

Love expressed.

Seeds planted.

These things matter.

Perhaps more than we realize.

As I reflect on my own life, I find myself less interested in being impressive and more interested in being useful.

Less interested in status and more interested in contribution.

Less interested in certainty and more interested in curiosity.

Less interested in having all the answers and more interested in asking better questions.

I suspect many readers will recognize a similar shift.

Age has a way of clarifying what truly matters.

Not always immediately.

But eventually.

One of the great paradoxes of growing older is that awareness of mortality can make life feel more precious.

Not less. The days matter.

The conversations matter.

The opportunities matter.

The people matter. The work matters.

The awareness that time is limited often sharpens appreciation for what remains.

And what remains may be more significant than we imagine.

There is one final idea I would like to carry forward.

The world often speaks of the second half of life as though it were an epilogue.

A summary. A winding down.

A final chapter written in smaller print.

I do not see it that way.

An epilogue explains what happened after the story ended.

You are still in the story.

There are still people to meet.

Things to learn.

Experiences to have.

Contributions to make.

Questions to explore.

Ways to grow.

The terrain may be different.

The pace may be different.

The priorities may be different.

But the journey continues.

Perhaps the most honest way to finish is not by pretending that every question has been answered.

It is by returning to the few things worth remembering while the story continues.



Final Reflection

What I Keep Trying to Remember

If you have made it this far, you already know something important.

I do not have life figured out.

When I was younger, I assumed wisdom would eventually arrive like a destination.

A place where everything finally made sense.

Where the important questions had answers.

Where certainty replaced confusion.

Life had other plans.

What arrived instead was perspective.

Not final answers.

A different relationship with the questions.

And perhaps that is enough.

I keep trying to remember that the terrain changes.

The map that once guided us may no longer match the ground beneath our feet.

That does not mean the map was wrong.

It means we are somewhere new.

Seeing that clearly is not surrender.

It is where the next honest step begins.

I keep trying to remember that attention is one of the ways we spend our lives.

Not every battle deserves it.

Not every opinion requires an answer.

Not every misunderstanding must be corrected.

Where attention goes, life follows.

I would rather spend what remains on people, work, questions, and experiences that give something back.

I keep trying to remember that life can become smaller without announcing itself.

One invitation declined.

One friendship neglected.

One curiosity dismissed.

One possibility postponed until tomorrow.

But expansion can begin just as quietly.

One conversation.

One project.

One question.

One small act of courage.

We do not always need a dramatic reinvention.

Sometimes we only need to open one door.

I keep trying to remember that being unfinished is not failure.

There are still things I do not know.

Things I have not tried.

Skills I may never master.

That is no longer embarrassing.

It is evidence that life still contains territory I have not explored.

We are still allowed to begin.

Still allowed to create something imperfect.

Still allowed to ask questions whose answers seem obvious to everyone else.

Still allowed to surprise ourselves.

I keep trying to remember that worth is not measured by productivity.

A person does not lose value when a career ends, a role changes, or the body becomes less capable.

Contribution takes many forms.

Sometimes it is work.

Sometimes teaching.

Sometimes creating.

Sometimes listening carefully to someone who needs to be heard.

Sometimes it is simply being present.

And there are seasons when we have very little to offer because life requires us to rest, recover, grieve, or receive care ourselves.

We belong before we accomplish anything.

Still, when something within us can be offered, even quietly, it may matter more than we know.

I keep trying to remember that the body is not an enemy or a verdict.

It is the terrain through which life is experienced.

We care for it where we can.

Adapt where we must.

Rest when rest is needed.

Accept help when help makes life more possible.

Capability may change.

Dignity does not.

I keep trying to remember that freedom always carries a question.

Not only:

“What am I free from?”

But:

“What am I free for?”

An open calendar is not yet a meaningful life.

It is space.

What fills that space matters.

A friendship.

A garden.

A story.

A volunteer shift.

A creative project.

A quiet afternoon spent doing something that brings us fully alive.

Purpose does not always arrive as a grand calling.

Often it grows from giving our attention to something worthwhile.

Most of all, I keep trying to remember what enough feels like.

For much of life, we are encouraged to seek more.

More achievement.

More recognition.

More certainty.

More evidence that our lives matter.

Age has gradually taught me that a life does not need to be enormous to be full.

One meaningful project can be enough.

One true friendship can be enough.

One person helped can be enough.

One reason to look forward to tomorrow can be enough.

Enough is as much as a feast.

That is not resignation.

It is recognition.

The recognition that meaning is not always waiting somewhere farther ahead.

Sometimes it is already here, quietly asking to be noticed.

Sun Tzu reminds me to see clearly.

Musashi reminds me that the way remains in training.

Jonathan reminds me to keep flying toward whatever still calls me.

I do not think of them as authorities with final answers.

I think of them as companions.

Voices that return when the terrain changes and I need to remember what matters.

Clear eyes. Steady hands. An open sky.

Perhaps wisdom is not something we finally possess.

Perhaps it is the willingness to return to these reminders.

Again and again.

And to anyone standing at the beginning of a new chapter, wondering whether there is still time:

There is.

The story is not over.

Keep becoming.



Acknowledgements

No book is written entirely alone.

The words may come from one person, but the ideas, experiences, lessons, and perspectives that shape them often arrive through countless others.

This book is no exception.

First, I would like to thank the many artists I have had the privilege of filming, interviewing, and learning from through Process Art Discovery.

Although this book is not specifically about art, many of its lessons emerged while sitting in artists' studios, watching creative work unfold, and listening to people share their journeys.

Artists have repeatedly reminded me that growth does not end with age, that curiosity remains valuable, and that creating something meaningful is often more important than achieving something impressive.

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I would also like to thank the viewers of Process Art Discovery and the many people who have taken time to comment, share stories, ask questions, and participate in conversations over the years.

You have continually reminded me that meaningful work often begins with simple human connection.

To my fellow dragon boat paddlers and steerspeople, thank you for the lessons in teamwork, perseverance, rhythm, humility, and occasionally getting soaked while learning all of the above.

Many of the metaphors in this book were shaped on the water.

To friends, family members, mentors, teachers, coworkers, and fellow travelers, thank you for the countless lessons that arrived through conversations both large and small.

Some of the most valuable wisdom I have encountered was shared casually over coffee, during difficult seasons, through acts of kindness, or by example rather than instruction.

Many of your contributions appear in these pages, even when your names do not.

I would also like to acknowledge three remarkable books and their authors.

The Art of War by Sun Tzu.

The Book of Five Rings by Miyamoto Musashi.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull by Richard Bach.

Although separated by centuries, cultures, and subject matter, each has accompanied me through different stages of life.

Their lessons helped shape the questions explored throughout this book, even when the answers ultimately came through lived experience.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge artificial intelligence.

Throughout the development of this manuscript, I used AI as a collaborative tool for research, discussion, organization, editing, and exploration of ideas.

Like any tool, its value depends on how it is used.

My goal has never been to replace human wisdom, creativity, or experience, but to enhance my ability to learn, reflect, connect ideas, and preserve stories that matter.

The thoughts, interpretations, conclusions, and perspectives presented in this book remain my own, but I am grateful for the assistance provided along the way.

Most of all, thank you for reading.

In a world increasingly filled with distraction, attention is a generous gift.

The fact that you chose to spend some of your time with these ideas is something I do not take lightly.

I hope you found something worth remembering.

And if not, I hope at least one page encouraged you to pause, reflect, and ask a worthwhile question.

Sometimes that is enough.

About the Author

Lorenz Plourde is a Canadian videographer, storyteller, and lifelong student of creativity, strategy, and human nature.

As the creator of Process Art Discovery, he has spent years documenting artists, preserving stories, and exploring the creative process through hundreds of interviews, videos, and conversations. His work has introduced him to painters, sculptors, potters, photographers, musicians, writers, and countless individuals whose experiences have shaped his understanding of purpose, curiosity, resilience, and lifelong growth.

Throughout his life, Lorenz has been drawn to ideas that help people navigate uncertainty with greater clarity and intention. The writings of Sun Tzu, Miyamoto Musashi, and Richard Bach have accompanied him through different seasons of life, providing lessons that continue to reveal new meaning with age and experience.

Although he does not consider himself a philosopher, Lorenz has long been fascinated by the practical application of timeless wisdom. His interests include storytelling, classic films, dragon boating, creativity, personal growth, strategy, legacy preservation, and helping others share their knowledge and experiences with future generations.

He believes that wisdom is often less about discovering something new than remembering something important.

Lorenz lives in British Columbia, Canada, where he continues creating videos, writing, learning, asking questions, and occasionally discovering that life still has a few surprises left.

This is his invitation to remain curious, stay engaged, and keep becoming.

NOTES AND SOURCES

Sun Tzu Seagull is a personal reflection rather than an academic study. The sources below are included for readers who would like to explore some of the books, research, and background that informed its themes.

They support broad observations about social connection, continued learning, creativity, adaptability, physical activity, purpose, contribution, and discernment. Research in these areas continues to develop, and an association between two things does not always prove that one caused the other.

The interpretations and conclusions presented throughout this book remain my own.

Foundational Works

Sun Tzu.

The Art of War.

Miyamoto Musashi.

The Book of Five Rings.

Richard Bach.

Jonathan Livingston Seagull.

These books have appeared in numerous editions and translations. The wording of translated passages may differ from one edition to another. The quotations and ideas in this book reflect familiar English renderings and my own interpretation of the lessons that remained meaningful to me.

Selected Research and Background

Social Connection and Loneliness

National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine.

Social Isolation and Loneliness in Older Adults: Opportunities for the Health Care System.

Washington, DC: The National Academies Press, 2020.

DOI: 10.17226/25663.

This consensus report reviews the evidence connecting social isolation and loneliness with physical health, cognitive health, quality of life, and mortality. It also considers the circumstances that can make older adults more vulnerable to isolation and the importance of meaningful social connection.

Continued Learning and Mental Engagement

Park, Denise C., Jennifer Lodi-Smith, Linda Drew, Sara Haber, Andrew Hebrank, Gérard N. Bischof, and Whitley Aamodt.

“The Impact of Sustained Engagement on Cognitive Function in Older Adults: The Synapse Project.”

Psychological Science, vol. 25, no. 1, 2014, pp. 103–112.

DOI: 10.1177/0956797613499592.

In this study, older adults learned demanding new skills such as quilting and digital photography. The results suggested that sustained participation in novel, mentally challenging activities can support aspects of memory in later adulthood.

Creativity, Art, and Well-Being

Fancourt, Daisy, and Saoirse Finn.

What Is the Evidence on the Role of the Arts in Improving Health and Well-Being? A Scoping Review. Health Evidence Network Synthesis Report 67. World Health Organization Regional Office for Europe, 2019.

ISBN: 978-92-890-5455-3.

This review brought together evidence from more than 3,000 studies examining the relationship between engagement with the arts and health and well-being across the lifespan. The research includes both active creation and participation in artistic and cultural experiences.

Psychological Flexibility and Adaptability

Plys, Evan, M. Lindsey Jacobs, Rebecca S. Allen, and Joanna J. Arch.

“Psychological Flexibility in Older Adulthood: A Scoping Review.” *Aging & Mental Health*, vol. 27, no. 3, 2023, pp. 453–465.

DOI: 10.1080/13607863.2022.2036948.

This review examined psychological flexibility in older adulthood, including openness, awareness, and engagement. The authors found meaningful associations with psychological health while also noting that this remains a developing area of research.

Movement and Healthy Aging

World Health Organization.

WHO Guidelines on Physical Activity and Sedentary Behaviour. Geneva: World Health Organization, 2020.

ISBN: 978-92-4-001512-8.

These evidence-based guidelines include recommendations for older adults and for people living with chronic conditions or disabilities. They emphasize that meaningful physical activity can take many forms and should be adapted to a person’s present abilities, circumstances, and health.

Purpose in Later Life

Alimujiang, Aliya, et al.

“Association Between Life Purpose and Mortality Among US Adults Older Than 50 Years.” *JAMA Network Open*, vol. 2, no. 5, 2019, e194270.

DOI: 10.1001/jamanetworkopen.2019.4270.

This observational study found an association between a stronger sense of purpose and lower mortality among adults over fifty. As with all observational research, it identifies a relationship rather than proving that purpose alone caused the outcome.

Purposeful Activity and Contribution

Owen, Rebecca, Katherine Berry, and Laura J. E. Brown.

“Enhancing Older Adults’ Well-Being and Quality of Life Through Purposeful Activity: A Systematic Review of Intervention Studies.” *The Gerontologist*, vol. 62, no. 6, 2022, pp. e317–e327.

DOI: 10.1093/geront/gnab017.

This review found preliminary evidence that purposeful activities can support well-being and quality of life in older adults, particularly when people are given a meaningful role such as volunteering, mentoring, helping, or learning a new skill. The authors also noted that the quality and quantity of available evidence varied.

Fraud and Scam Awareness

Federal, Provincial and Territorial Ministers Responsible for Seniors Forum.

What Every Older Canadian Should Know About: Fraud and Scams. Government of Canada, updated 2025.

This public resource describes common fraud methods, including identity theft, online scams, high-pressure sales tactics, telephone fraud, and requests for personal or financial information. It also emphasizes that people of every age can be deceived and that victims should not feel ashamed to report what happened.

Grandma Moses

Smithsonian American Art Museum.

“Grandma Moses.” Artist biography.

Anna Mary Robertson “Grandma” Moses began painting seriously at seventy-seven. Her work was discovered publicly soon afterward, and she continued painting into her final years, producing more than 1,500 images before her death at 101. Her life is included in this book as one example of meaningful creative work beginning much later than convention might expect.



THE TERRAIN CHANGES. THE JOURNEY CONTINUES.

What can an ancient military strategist, a Japanese swordsman, and a determined seagull teach us about the second half of life?

More than we might expect.

Drawing inspiration from Sun Tzu, Miyamoto Musashi, and Richard Bach, Lorenz Plourde explores what it means to see our circumstances clearly, choose our battles wisely, remain open to learning, and adapt when familiar roles and plans begin to change.

These are not instructions from someone who claims to have life figured out. They are observations from a fellow traveller—gathered through work, uncertainty, friendship, creativity, mistakes, conversations with artists, and the ordinary experiences that gradually shape a life.

Thoughtful, compassionate, and quietly encouraging, *Sun Tzu Seagull* is for anyone standing at the beginning of an unfamiliar chapter and wondering whether there is still time.

There is.

The story is not over.

KEEP BECOMING.

LORENZ PLOURDE is a Canadian videographer, storyteller, and creator of Process Art Discovery. Through hundreds of interviews, videos, and conversations, he has documented artists, preserved personal stories, and explored creativity, curiosity, purpose, and lifelong growth.

He lives in British Columbia, where he continues creating, writing, learning, and discovering that life still contains a few surprises.



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