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CULTURE

THE NEW OLD AGE

What a new life stage can teach the rest of us about how to find meaning and purpose
—before it's too late

By David Brooks

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ANNE KENNER WORKED for many years as a federal prosecutor, first in the Eastern District of New York, and then in the Northern District of California, trying mobsters and drug dealers. “I like the hairy edge,” she told me. Her job was meaningful to her; it made her feel useful. When she became disturbed by the powerlessness of some of the young people caught up in the system, she developed a curriculum to help students understand their rights if they came into contact with law enforcement: Here’s what to do if the police stop you; here’s what to do if a cop asks to look inside your backpack.

A turning point in Kenner's life came when she was in her 50s. Her brother, who had been troubled since childhood, shot and killed himself. They'd had a difficult relationship when they were kids, and she hadn't spoken with him in 33 years. He had cut off almost all contact with her family decades earlier, as his life spiraled into reclusive paranoia. Still, she told me, his death "was a massively tumultuous experience. I wanted to understand why I was knocked sideways personally."

Around that time, she heard about what was then a new program at Stanford University called the Distinguished Careers Institute. It's for adults, mostly in their 50s and 60s, who are retiring from their main career and trying to figure out what they want to do with the rest of their lives. The fellows spend a year learning together as a cohort of a few dozen, reinventing themselves for the next stage. "Somebody told me it offered breathing room, a chance to take a step back," Kenner recalled.

But that is not how she experienced it: "It wasn't breathing space; it was free fall."

On her first day, Phil Pizzo, who'd been a researcher and dean of Stanford's medical school before founding the program, told the group to throw away their résumés: "That's no longer who you are. That's not going to help you." Kenner took his words to heart. "I thought, *Okay, nothing I've done matters. Everything I do going forward has to be different.*"

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Kenner's first few days on campus were a shock. The fellows, most of whom had been wildly successful in tech or finance or some other endeavor, were no longer running anything. They were effectively college freshmen again, carrying backpacks, trying to get into classes, struggling to remember how to write a term paper. One day Kenner walked into the program's study area and saw "the guy who was the biggest success and the biggest asshole" in the program lying on his back on the floor.

"What are you doing down there?"
Kenner asked.

He couldn't answer; he was hyperventilating. "This 65-year-old brilliantly successful man was in a total panic" because of the changes to his life, Kenner recalled. Over the ensuing year, she continued, "he became a dear friend."

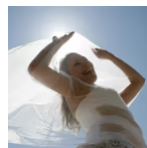
At one point during the program, the fellows are asked to get up and tell the group something important about their life journey, something deeper than the

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items on their CV. Kenner talked about her brother. It was a transformative experience: For her family, her brother's troubled nature had always been shrouded in secrecy, and not openly discussed. But "keeping secrets was very dangerous in my family," she now realizes. "Telling my brother's story was my declaration of independence from all that."



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Her life has a new direction now. When I talked with her in May, a few years after her Stanford experience, she was working with the Magic Theatre in San Francisco to workshop a play she had written about Henry VIII's second wife, Anne Boleyn, one of Kenner's lifelong heroes. The play was in rehearsals as we spoke; readings ran during the daytime and Kenner rewrote scenes in the evenings. "I can't sleep, it's so exciting," she told me. "I'm a pretty controlled person. I'm not much of a crier and these theater people are such emotional people. They're crying all the time. I'm learning to go with that."

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She reflected on one of the things she had learned during her second education in the Stanford DCI program: “It’s all about putting myself in situations in which I know nothing. I can fail big. Who gives a shit? I’m 64.”

STANFORD, HARVARD, and Notre Dame have three of the most established postcareer programs in the U.S., but others are popping up. I learned about them when my wife and I agreed to teach at the University of Chicago’s version, the Leadership and Society Initiative, which launches this fall. These programs are proliferating now because we’re witnessing the spread of a new life stage.

The idea of adolescence, as we now understand it, emerged over the course of the first half of the 20th century. Gradually people began to accept that there is a distinct phase of life between childhood and adulthood; the word *teenager* came into widespread use sometime in the 1940s.

In the 21st century, another new phase is developing, between the career phase and senescence. People are living longer lives. If you are 60 right now, you have a roughly 50 percent chance of reaching 90. In other words, if you retire in your early or mid-60s, you can expect to have another 20 years before your mind and body begin their steepest decline.

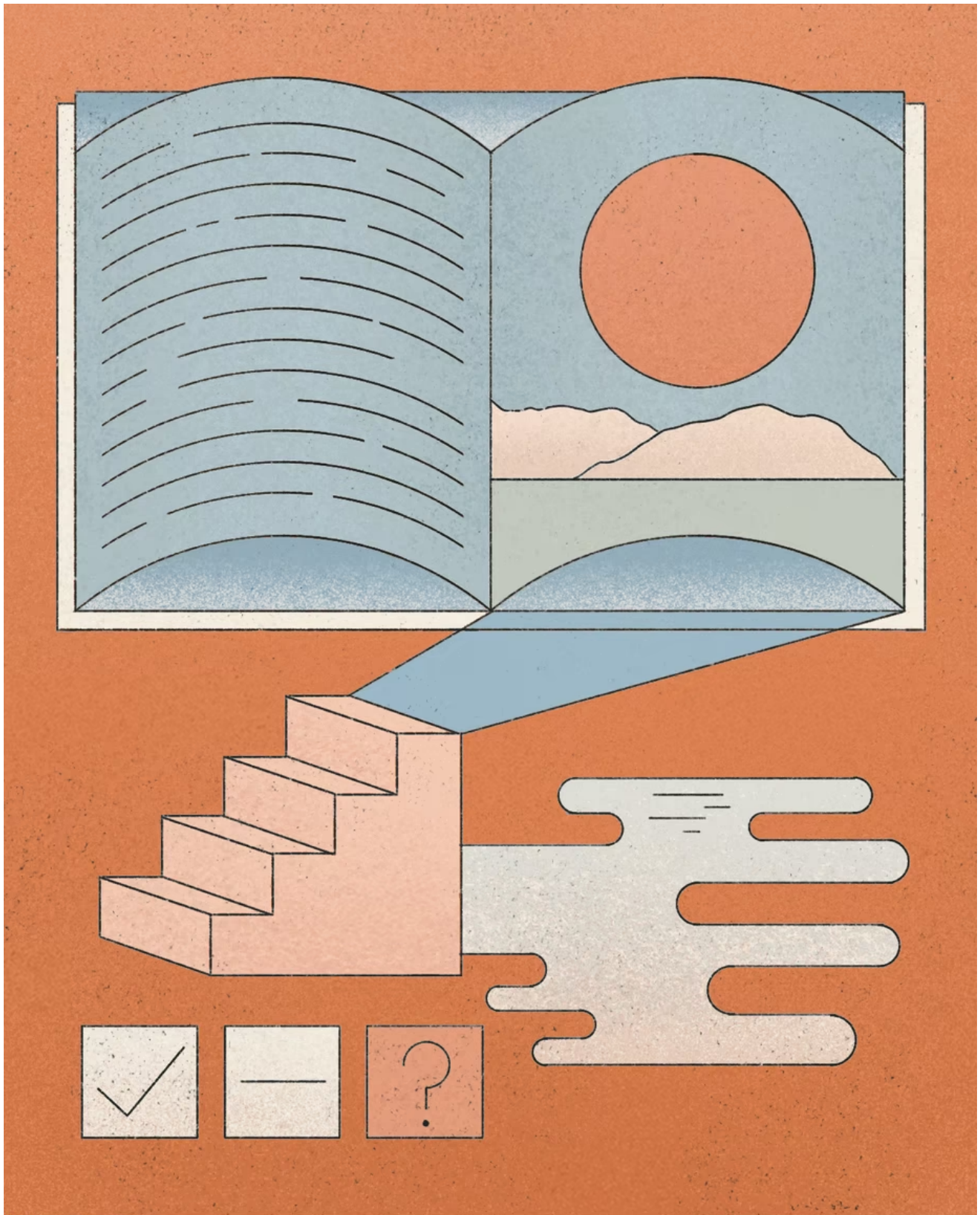


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We don't yet have a good name for this life stage. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, a notable scholar in this area, calls it the "Third Chapter." Some call it "Adulthood II" or, the

name I prefer, the “Encore Years.” For many, it’s a delightful and rewarding phase, but the transition into it can be rocky.

For the participants in these programs, who are largely upper-middle-class and well educated, their careers have defined their identities. Their sense of significance derived from their professional achievements. What happens when that all goes away?

Over the past few months, I’ve had conversations with people who are approaching this transition or are in the middle of it. These conversations can be intense. One senior executive told me that he fears two things in life: retirement and death—and that he fears retirement more.

The business consultant William Bridges argued that every transition involves a period of loss, then a period in the neutral zone, and then a period of rebirth. The loss that comes with retirement can be brutal. Some highly successful people mourn the life that gave them meaning and made them the center of the room. People in the neutral zone don’t yet know who the new version of themselves will be. They report feeling hollow, disoriented, empty.

One 70-year-old told me that when she retired, she learned that she’s bad at predicting what will make her happy. Many of the activities she’d planned to pursue turned out to be dull or unfulfilling. Another retiree told me that, unexpectedly, the thing he misses most about his job is the work emails—the feeling that he was inside

the information flow. “It’s the recognition of loss that brings people to programs like ours,” Tom Schreier, who was the vice chairman of the investment-management firm Nuveen in Chicago and who now directs Notre Dame’s Inspired Leadership Initiative, told me. “When they ran an organization, they thought they had 200 great friends. Suddenly, only five are as responsive as they used to be.”

These folks are in the middle of what the psychologist Erik Erikson called a developmental crisis. People will either achieve generativity—a way of serving others—or sink into stagnation. At an age when you think they’d be old enough to know the answers, they find themselves thrown back into fundamental questions: *Who am I? What’s my purpose? What do I really want? Do I matter?*

These academic programs are meant to help them answer those questions. The people in the Stanford, Harvard, and Notre Dame programs are not average Americans. Most are ridiculously privileged, affluent enough to pay the steep tuition costs and to move for a year to places like Palo Alto or Cambridge. Their lives are a million miles away from the great bulk of humanity who either can’t afford to retire, or who are one setback away from real financial stress, and can’t afford to take a year off to contemplate meaning and purpose.

But the lessons the super-elite learn there apply more broadly than just to them. People at all income levels derive some of their identity from how they contribute to

the world and provide for those they love, and people at all income levels feel a crisis of identity, and get thrown back on existential questions, when those roles change or fade away. The working poor struggle with blows to their identity when age or infirmity demands that they cut back or change jobs, even if they have to keep laboring, and even though they don't have the luxury of taking classes where they can engage in deep thought. While the people who attend these programs have built their lives around the pursuit of high-status careers in a way that makes them especially prone to experience profound crises when that success and status are in the rearview mirror, the lessons they learn here have wisdom for all of us.

I'm fascinated by these programs because, among other reasons, I'm hoping they can serve as an antidote to the cultural malady that *The Atlantic's* Derek Thompson calls workism. This is the modern way of thinking that, he writes, "valorizes work, career, and achievement above all else." Many Americans, he continues, have come to assume that work can provide everything that humans once got from their religion—meaning, community, self-actualization, a sense of high calling.

Modern life is oriented around the meritocracy, which implies certain values—that life is best seen as a climb toward the top, that achievement is the essence of a good life, that successful people are to be admired more than less successful people. But this overreliance on our work identities is unhinging us.

Since the dawn of the modern age, people have been complaining about the hollowness of the rat race, but nobody ever does anything about it. If these post-professional programs can help older people figure out what a fulfilling life looks like when work and career are no longer in the center, then maybe they'll have some lessons for the rest of us. The emergence of a cohort of people who are still vital and energetic but who are living by a different set of values, creating a different conception of the good life, might help the broader culture achieve a values reset.

Most revolutions come from the young. Is it possible that the one we need now will be driven by the old?

SOME PEOPLE ENTER one of these programs looking for a relatively simple vocational shift. They have a vague sense that now is the time to give back, so they figure their next life will look similar to their old one, only with more do-gooding. But many soon discover that they underestimated how much of their previous life was oriented around career success. They underestimate the power of the workaholic mentality they've adopted—goal-centered, strategic, rationalistic, emotionally and spiritually stunted.

“We cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning,” Carl Jung observed. “For what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.” As they leave their

corner-office jobs, these erstwhile masters of the universe are smashing into this blunt reality.

Susan Gianinno, who was the CEO of the advertising firm J. Walter Thompson, attended the Harvard Advanced Leadership Initiative and is now a co-chair of the program's alumni association. She observes that in high-powered jobs, life is all about instrumentality and performance—optimizing effort and delivering results. But when you get to the stage beyond your work life, that mentality is not relevant. “The key shift is to go from mastery to servant,” Gianinno told me. When you're in a high-powered work environment, you think of yourself as a master of performance. But to succeed in this new phase of life, “you have to serve.”

The fellows have to cast aside the impressive persona their ego wants them to project—a worldly success, someone important. Jacob Schlesinger was a reporter for *The Wall Street Journal* for more than 30 years. “There was a period when it was a thrill to see your name on the front page,” he says. But the thrill waned, the process of reporting stories grew more bureaucratic and grinding, and he realized he didn't want to do it anymore. He enrolled in the Stanford program but entered carrying that impressive *Wall Street Journal* identity with him. When he went to a doctor appointment while at Stanford, Schlesinger told me, the first thing the doctor said was, “Oh, you work at *The Wall Street Journal*.”

But gradually, that identity dissipated. New interests emerged. “I immersed myself in spirituality,” Schlesinger said. “I also took a lot of improv classes. I feel stupid saying this, because I used to think it was all stupid—I called it the ‘vulnerability industrial complex.’” He enrolled in a memoir class. “It was jaw-dropping what people were willing to reveal,” he said. “Doing this program opened my mind.”

Beating the meritocratic values *out* of a 65-year-old requires a very different pedagogy than beating them *into* a 20-year-old. These programs differ from collegiate programs in a variety of ways. In these classrooms, for starters, teachers and students are similarly aged peers. There are no grades or class rankings—the normal measures of meritocratic rank and status. The readings are shorter than you might assign to a college student. (When I’ve led seminars with middle-aged adults, I’ve found that they can’t get through texts that are easy for college students—their deep-reading skills deteriorated as their career progressed.) But these readings don’t seem so central anyway, because almost every person I spoke with said the single most important part of their program was the chance to walk through this life transition with new friends. “I now have 30 new friends,” Margaret Higgins, who attended the Notre Dame program, told me. “Who in their 60s has 30 good new friends?”

The students serve as mutual support societies for one another as they make a vocational leap of faith. “I wanted a future I couldn’t predict,” Susan Nash, a former litigator, told me. Letting go of the wheel is going to be hard “if control has been your

MO,” Father Dan Groody, who teaches in the Notre Dame program, told me. “It’s hard but liberating.”

In my conversations with this cohort, I would confess that the demands of my own career have made me obsessively time-focused. I have this clock ticking in my head. When I pull into a gas station to fill up my tank, I think compulsively to myself: *You’ll have 90 free seconds; you can get two emails done.* The Encore types responded to my confession with the indulgence you might offer a small child. They’d learned to slow down enough to feel. Some of the programs assign Abraham Joshua Heschel’s book *The Sabbath* to help students learn to pause. “We start by stopping the busyness train. If you want to go deeper into the heart’s desire, you need to create the silence to hear it,” Father Groody said.

As the fellows shed the optimization mindset, time stretches out. There isn’t a long-term career trajectory to manage. There’s more freedom to ask *What do I want to do today?*

AT THEIR BEST, the programs compel students to ask some fundamental questions, and to come up with new answers. The first question is *Who am I?* The programs run people through various exercises that help them reflect on their lives. At Stanford, many students take a memoir-writing class. At Notre Dame they go to cemeteries and write their own obituary.

They are learning to get beyond conceiving of their lives as just a series of résumé notches. They are also learning to think in different ways. The psychologist Jerome Bruner argued that there are two modes of thinking: paradigmatic mode and narrative mode. Put simply, paradigmatic mode is making the case for something; narrative mode is telling stories.

Most of us spend our careers getting good at paradigmatic mode—making arguments, creating PowerPoint presentations, putting together strategy memos, writing legal briefs. But in plotting the next chapter of their lives, the fellows need to update their story, which requires going into narrative mode. They have to weave a tale of how they grew and changed, going back to childhood.

The programs use various devices to help students see themselves at a deeper level. Harry Davis, a longtime management professor at the University of Chicago who is an adviser to and teacher in its Leadership and Society program, asks his students to identify their core self, their visible self, and their best self. At Notre Dame, instructors draw on Thomas Merton's theories about self and identity, asking students to describe both their true self and the false self they show the world. Tom Schreier, the Notre Dame program director, observes that most people find themselves surprisingly unfamiliar with their true self.

The second big question the students must answer is *What do I really want?* When we're young, we tend to want what other people want: the things that will bring affirmation, status, and financial gain. But in the Encore phase, students are compelled to move from pursuing the extrinsic desires the world rewards to going after their intrinsic desires.

That process can be daunting. Father Groody remembers that “one day we were introducing the topic of the inner world and the heart’s desires. There was palpable tension in the room. People were getting red in the face; their veins were popping out. These were these high-achieving folks and to many of them, the idea of sharing from vulnerable spaces ... that was just really frightening.”

Many people in this stage of life realize that they abandoned some dream on their way up the career ladder—the dream of becoming a musician or a playwright or a teacher. They pick up the lost strands—the activities and the talents that have gone unrealized—and build their new lives around them.

“The hard thing to do when you get old is to keep your horizons open,” the theologian and civil-rights hero Howard Thurman once wrote. “The first part of your life everything is in front of you, all your potential and promise. But over the years, you make decisions; you carve yourself into a given shape. Then the challenge is to keep discovering the green growing edge.”

The third question for the students is *What should I do?* Many fellows enter the programs thinking they'll take on some project that is adjacent to their previous career. A real-estate developer may want to work on affordable housing. But according to Schreier, there turns out to be nearly zero correlation between the thing students want to do at the beginning of the year and the thing they want to do at the end. Their horizon of options widens.

Many of the alumni I spoke with have launched or joined programs to take on big, obvious social problems: school reform, homelessness, the dearth of women of color in tech. But I was most entranced by the people doing little things with great joy. Davis, who has worked as a management professor at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business for 60 years, told me, "I want to open a bakery. I don't want to run it. I just want to bake." Susan Nash, the former big-time lawyer, talked with great enthusiasm about how much fun she's having reporting for a local wire service. After a career in venture capital, M. J. Elmore took a course in art history while at Stanford and now paints. "I'm in the third trimester of life," she told me. "I'm filling it with painting."

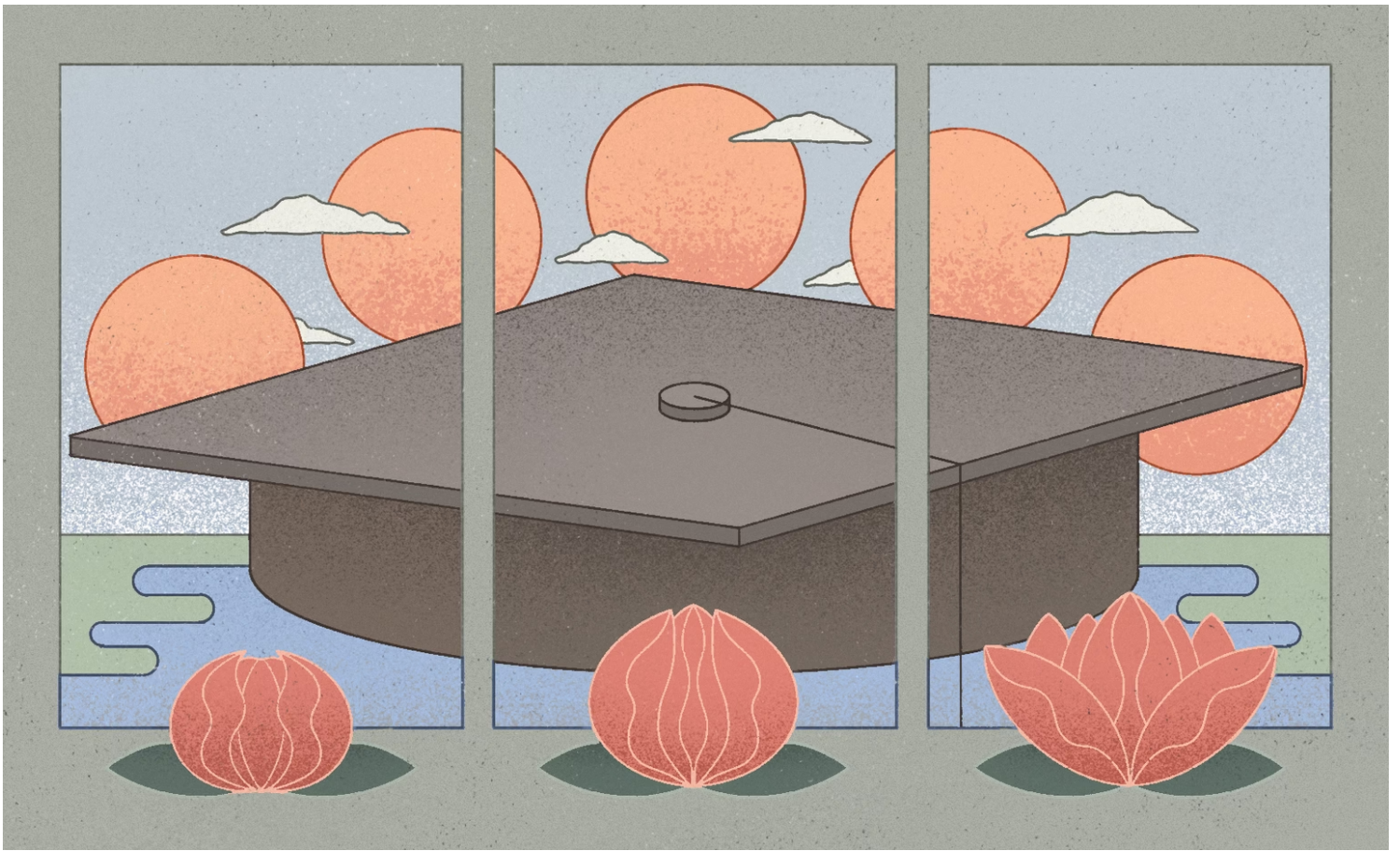


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“PEOPLE IN THESE PROGRAMS do not care what you did before,” Nash told me. “We all start over in forming new identities.” Many of the students ultimately end up not missing their sparkling careers; in fact, they can’t believe they allowed themselves to be stuck in those professional ruts for all those decades. Students in the middle of the program come up to Father Groody and say, “How did I miss this for so long?” They are grieving, he said, telling him, “I should have done this earlier.”

For people like me, still in full-bore career mode, hearing this is jarring. We throw ourselves into work, consumed by finishing this or that project, convinced that each professional task is truly important. And yet if what these oldsters say is true, it's likely that at some point we're going to leave it all behind and not look back.

What lesson should the rest of us glean from these folks? If you're 35 or 49 or 57 and see people living their deepest lives after they've shed the curse of workism, should you drop out of the rat race and take this whole career thing less seriously?

That's the conclusion that many young people I know are drawing. They look at the manic careerism of the older generations and see a recipe for an anxious, exhausting, and existentially empty life. Maybe you've encountered the TikTok influencer Gabrielle Judge, who popularized the #lazygirljob meme. The idea behind #lazygirl (and also behind the ostensible trend toward "quiet quitting") is that you should find a job that will pay the bills but won't demand much of your time or passion. Abandon the ordeal of careerism and devote your energies to the daily pleasures of life.

Maybe I'm stuck in a generational rut, but my own view is that the #lazygirl approach isn't quite right. If you make only a half-assed commitment to your work, you're settling for mediocrity in an endeavor that will necessarily absorb a large chunk of your life. And if you decide to prioritize pleasure, you'll spend your days consuming random experiences that you'll measure on shallow, aesthetic grounds—was today tasty or bland? You'll accumulate a series of temporary experiences that don't add up to anything substantial.

The people who enroll in Encore programs have chosen purpose over leisure. In their senior years, they've revealed something I take to be a general human truth: Most of us don't just want simple happiness; we want intensity. We want to feel that sense of existential urgency you get when you are engrossed in some meaningful project, when you know you are doing something important and good. These programs don't quiet ambitions so much as elevate them, redirect them toward something generous—whether it's a grand project, like reforming schools, or a local passion, like painting, baking, or writing a play about Anne Boleyn.

But how on earth did we end up with a society in which 65-year-olds *have to take courses* to figure out who they are, what they really want, and what they should do next? How did we wind up with a culture in which people's veins pop out in their neck when they are forced to confront their inner lives?

The answer is that we live in a culture that has become wildly imbalanced, like a bodybuilder who has pumped his right side up to excessive proportion while allowing his left side to shrivel away. To put it another way, a well-formed life is governed by two different logics. The first is the straightforward, utilitarian logic that guides us through our careers: Input leads to output; effort leads to reward; pursue self-interest; respond to incentives; think strategically; climb the ladder; impress the world. This is the logic that business schools teach you.

But there is a second and deeper logic to life, gift logic, which guides us as we form important relationships, serve those around us, and cultivate our full humanity. This is a logic of contribution, not acquisition; surrender, not domination. It's a moral logic, not an instrumental one, and it's full of paradox: You have to give to receive. You have to lose yourself to find yourself. You have to surrender to something outside yourself to gain strength within yourself.

If career logic helps you conquer the world, gift logic helps you serve it. If career logic focuses on “how” questions—how to climb the career ladder, how to get things done efficiently—gift logic focuses on “why” questions, such as why are we here, and what good should we ultimately serve? If career logic is about building up the ego, gift logic is about relinquishing it and putting others first.

A well-lived life, at any stage, is lived within the tension between these two logics. The problem is that we have managed to build a world in which utilitarian logic massively eclipses moral logic. The brutal meritocracy has become such an all-embracing cosmos, many of us have trouble thinking outside of it. From an early age, the pressure is always on to win gold stars, to advance, optimize, impress. That endless quest for success can come at the expense of true learning. Many of the students I've taught over the years don't have time for intellectual curiosity or spiritual growth—a condition that only worsens through adulthood as their obligations proliferate.

I see these Encore programs as green shoots, little buds for a new set of countercultural institutions for people who have thrived in the meritocracy but are now eager to live according to gift logic. They are hoping to live in the sides of themselves that have atrophied—to live a spiritual life, a life of moral purpose. These programs are places where it's okay to think about purpose, okay to want to shed your old workist identity, okay to orient your life around the ideal of self-sacrificial service. At their best, these programs are trying to cultivate moral imagination, so that people can picture a nobler life and muster the courage to go out and live it.

These programs should not just be for rich people; they are in urgent need of democratization. Tens of millions of people transition to their Encore phase every year. Attending less rarified versions of these programs, if only for a couple of weeks or sporadically throughout the year, should be a rite of passage leading up to retirement. Phyllis Moen is a life-stages scholar who studied some of the established Encore programs before starting one of her own at the University of Minnesota. Her program isn't geared toward the masters of the universe but rather to middle-class types—teachers, small-business owners, some physicians. She says her fellows at Minnesota confront the same challenges as the CEO types at Stanford and Harvard—the same loss of identity, the same need to retell their life story, the same uncertainty about what to do next. Differences in social class don't necessarily mean differences in the crisis of identity that confronts people upon retirement.

Shouldn't there be more programs like Moen's, that balance utilitarian logic with moral logic for different phases of life? I'm not an entrepreneur, but while working on this story, a fantasy kept popping into my head: Somebody should start a company called Transition Teams. This would be a firm that helps people organize into cohorts during life's crucial transitions—after college, after divorce, after a professional setback, after the death of a spouse, after retirement. These are pivotal moments when the most humane learning takes place, and yet America today lacks the sort of programs or institutions that could gentle the transitions and maximize the learning through mutual support. (In the old days, the Elks Club or the Ladies Auxiliary or the VFW hall or your worship community might have helped, but they've receded in recent decades, as has been well documented.)

These programs wouldn't have to be expensive: Rent some rooms at a local college or at the local library. Offer a choice of different curricula. Hire facilitators to keep the conversations going. Let the participants themselves run the show.

The human hunger for meaning and fulfillment is strong. And yet America today is too awash in workism and too short on purpose. We shouldn't have to wait until we're 65 to learn how to transform our lives. Maybe the people reinventing themselves now in these Encore programs can show the rest of us the way.

David Brooks is a contributing writer at *The Atlantic* and the author of the forthcoming book *How to Know a Person: The Art of Seeing Others Deeply and Being Deeply Seen*.
