

The Third Act: Exploring your Second Act to Prepare for the Third.

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We are the first generation of women who have had careers for most of our lives. We are living lives that most of our parents and grandparents didn't have and, perhaps, couldn't imagine. We are entering a period of life that is virtually uncharted, a time in which we are free from social expectations and reduced family obligations, with the freedom, resources and desire to engage in new activities with meaning and purpose. Science and medical advances have extended our years with generally better health than previous generations. This gives us the opportunity to turn our dreams into realities, to consider options previously considered impractical, and to prioritize how we want to spend our time. Now, it's up to us to decide and plan for our continued vitality.

In fact for many today, retirement is a "roleless" role. This is true in large part because the traditional notion of retirement fits with a worn out notion of aging that conceives of it primarily in terms of disengagement and decline. The news reports that "old" is being redefined as more of us are living to be over 100. The Department of Labor reports that in 2006 over 6% of Americans over 75 worked.ⁱ So, today we ask, how appropriate is retirement for a vital person with 30-40 years left to live?

We use the metaphor of the theater to ignite people's imagination. Our growing up years constitute the first act, our second act includes our middle years focusing on career and family, and our third act (often for the first time) is ours to choose - we have

an opportunity to create a better quality of life, leave a legacy or pursue our life-long dreams.

What is Waiting in the Wings?

The years ahead beyond 50 offer exciting opportunities and infinite possibilities. Yet, this less structured time of choice can also be frustrating and overwhelming if we have not adequately planned and prepared for it. It is best to take some time to prepare for the transition from your second act to your Third Act. Preparing for your Third Act begins first by reviewing your second act (and maybe your first act), and exploring the scripts (themes or patterns) from your work and career, your family, volunteer and social life. What scripts can you build upon? Which ones are liabilities for your Third Act that you need to adjust or learn to manage differently? What patterns or beliefs get in your way from doing your best, what relationships, job and other commitments are a drain and not life enhancing? Taking stock of our second act, and making adjustments where necessary, is a critical step in moving fully into our Third Act.

Science tells us that most of our aging is influenced by our lifestyle. The good news is that we can make changes that will enhance our lives. We have found it helpful to raise questions about our current lives-- the physical, emotional, professional, personal and spiritual dimensions—to clarify for ourselves what is waiting in the wings before we leave a full time job, change careers or move-- and launch our Third Act.

Physical

- We know that many of us have two, three, four or more decades of life remaining and that each generation is more active with more health and vitality than ever before. According to *Trends*ⁱⁱ reported by Audio Tech Business Summaries (9-15-2005) average life spans are projected to reach 88 for women by 2065. By 2010 there will be 131,000 Americans over age 100 compared to 37,000 twenty years ago. Yet, in our second act, we also may have neglected our fitness, gained some weight and find our cholesterol or blood pressure too high for good health. How is your current health and fitness? Do you have a commitment to support your health and wellness? Do you need to take some action to lose weight, quit smoking, improve your diet or get more rest?

Emotional

- Popular stereotypes would lead us to believe that most of us go through a mid-life crises between 40 and 60 leading to unhappiness and depression. Yet researchers who have been studying the development process of our lives report that, far from being a time of turmoil, dissatisfaction and dread of getting old, only a small percent of participants report having a midlife crises (23% in the MacArthur Foundation Research Network Study)ⁱⁱⁱ and in many cases it had nothing to do with aging. Based on the results of this study most people are entering their sixth or seventh decades with increased feeling of well-being, equanimity, a sense of control over many parts of their lives and feeling younger than their years. The AARP study in 2006 also reports that 85% of those who have already retired are satisfied with their lives. These studies suggest that

aging is not the dreaded time of our imaginations, but rather with intention and focus we can create a joyful and satisfying Third Act. What brings you joy, pleasure and deep satisfaction? How can you continue to find those emotional rewards in the coming years?

Professional

- As we mentioned in the opening paragraph, we are a generation of women who have pursued careers for most of our lives. For many, those careers have brought achievements, and the personal and financial rewards of success in our chosen fields. Such success has also meant the stressful demands of long hours and hard work to meet unfair expectations or to challenge traditional stereotypes. Many women have had two full time jobs – raising a family and a career. Many of us are ready to “slow down”, have more time for relaxation and to enjoy other interests. Yet some of us do not want to quit or financially can't afford to. The Fortune 2005 Retirement Guide reports that 42% of the over-50 population want to rotate between work and leisure. Others of us, a startling 56%, want to leave one career behind and launch a new and perhaps more entrepreneurial venture that we have always dreamed about. Others of us want to use our professional skills in ways that contribute and make a difference to our community or to the world. Do you want or need to continue to work? Are you interested in launching something new? How much do you want to work? How do you want to contribute your skills, experience and your time?

Personal

- Full time work and raising a family leaves little time for women to pursue hobbies, leisure time activities or make contributions as a volunteer. As our family obligations are reduced and we think of working only part time or even leaving our work and careers, opportunities open up. We can pursue long delayed dreams, complete neglected projects, learn to play the piano, speak Spanish, study history, or make a meaningful contributions to causes about which we are passionate. The 60 year olds in the AARP study reported that they wanted to spend time with loved ones, engage in their interests and hobbies or make time to do what they had always wanted to do. Do you have a passion to make a difference, to contribute to your community? Do you have dreams or projects you have longed to plunge into with time to pursue and accomplish? Do you have subjects or skills you want to learn?

Spiritual

- The multi-tasking, over-scheduled life cruising on auto-pilot leaves little time to explore the questions of deeper meaning in our lives. We may be disenchanted with the “rewards” of climbing the corporate ladder or when time does emerge, we are often at a loss, drifting and feeling somehow empty of purpose and direction. Many women feel that some how during the second act, they set aside something important they want to retrieve. The experts suggest that the changes that matter during this time are more often spiritual and psychological. Are you asking what you are called to do and what will provide meaning and purpose in this next phase of your life? Is your life fulfilled and guided by your

spiritual beliefs? Are you wondering if you will be satisfied if you quit work and leave your career?

Now that you have reviewed your second act, it is time to draft your script for your Third Act. This requires being proactive, taking personal responsibility and being open to learning about yourself. Writing your own script may be new to you and it may require mastering your tendency to be reactive, overcoming habitual thought and belief patterns that have governed your behavior or following the wishes and expectations of others. You may need to establish boundaries, find routines that support your needs and exercise more independence. Now is the time to do that before you find yourself center stage in your Third Act without a script.

ⁱ Christoffersen, John, “Need, Lifestyle Keep Seniors on the Job”, SFGate.com, August 14, 2007.

ⁱⁱ “Trends”, Audio Tech Business Summaries, 9-15-2005.

ⁱⁱⁱ Goode, Erica, “New Study Finds Middle Age is Prime of Life”, New York Times, undated.