

## Writing the Script For Your Third Act

*By Beverly Scott*

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 work.<sup>1</sup> So, today we ask, how appropriate is retirement for a vital person with 30-40 years left to live?

At mid-life, 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 stage 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.

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.

### Creating a Star Performance

Now is the time to plan your transition, to draft your script for your third act. This requires being proactive, taking personal responsibility and being open to learning about your self. 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.

Researchers studying the lives of seniors have found that those seniors whose lives are happier and healthier include attitudes and activities which bring them more satisfaction and a more positive outlook on life. They are deeply engaged with contributing to the lives of others or some call “socially productive aging”.<sup>2</sup>

Four specific areas seem to have the most impact as you draft your script.

#### *Positive Appreciation:*

Experiencing the present moment and being mindful of what is new without judgment, looking back with contentment and gratitude or looking ahead with optimism and seeing its potential. To some extent, positive feelings may

fluctuate around an inborn “set point”. However, psychologists say that anyone can learn to increase positive feelings; although some of us with lower “set points” may need to work harder. Mindfulness is one key to increasing positive feelings and enjoying the present. Mindfulness is actively noticing things without evaluating or categorizing them. Gratitude exercises not only lift your mood but also improve physical health and raise energy levels.

### *Seeking Meaning:*

Transcending the self and using your signature strengths to belong or serve something that is larger than yourself. Creating meaning through involvement in a cause for which you have passion and creates meaning in your life is one of the most important components of happiness. It may involve nature, art, community, spirituality or something else. Giving makes you feel good, frequent acts of kindness boosts well-being and volunteering gives you a sense of purpose because you matter to someone else.

### *Active Engagement:*

Being in “flow” occurs when our skills are balanced with sufficient challenge to keep us engaged but not overly frustrated. We are more likely to be fully engaged when we are active rather than passive and when that activity requires using skills and focus. This may be a challenge at any time for some of us, but particularly so in our third act, when the structure and goals of our second acts are no longer provided for us through our work. Rowe and Kahn in ground

breaking research on aging, found one of the key components in successful aging is to be engaged with life. By deploying your highest strength and talents, you can have more intense absorption—flow—in more areas of your life.

### *Quality of Everyday Experience.*

While traditional approaches to life planning often emphasize the importance of vision and goals, it is clear that the quality of our everyday experience is an important determinant of satisfaction. The simple pleasures of leisurely reading the paper, calling a friend, having a cup of tea or taking a nap can bring daily contentment. Having strong ties to friends and family gives a big boost to happiness and savoring the sensory experiences increases the pleasure of our daily lives.

This suggests that creating the vibrant rewarding script for our third act, may require some intentional focus on how to bring these qualities into our lives. It is not as simple as leaving a job or enjoying a retirement party. It is a big psychological shift and it is important to be prepared for change and growth.

Creating the script for a socially productive Third Act means clarifying your values, finding out who you really are at your core and repositioning yourself with this self-awareness for fulfillment . We have found that one way to find this self-reflective focus is to create a space and opportunity to explore questions both personally and in dialogue with others and to take time to think through the

hopes, dreams and realities that will help shape a vital, vibrant and engaging script for your third act.

What does the curtain call you to do in your third act?

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<sup>1</sup> Christoffersen, John, “Need, Lifestyle Keep Seniors on the Job”, SFGate.com, August 14, 2007.

<sup>2</sup> Buford, Bob, “Finishing Well: How Pathfinders Transform Success to Significance” LEADER TO LEADER, Winter 2007.