



FROM CHAPTER 1

WHAT'S DIFFERENT ABOUT OUR SITUATION?

The thought of retirement unsettles many of us in ways we never imagined. The downturn of the economy delivered a hard blow to people over fifty. We may have fears about not only what we'll do without work but also how we'll survive. Many approaching retirement have been placed in a dreadful situation by economic turbulence. It is like ending a long voyage and seeing a safe harbor on the horizon, only to be hit by a storm that destroys your mast. That's the bad side. But this economic climate change has also provided a wakeup call to all of us to start doing hard thinking about what is important in the second half of life.

A second destabilizing factor is the increase in social discontinuity, violence, and international political conflict. The playing field of our lives has become nearly unrecognizable. Traditions and social structures everywhere have been torn apart by an explosion of knowledge, technology, changing economics, national and cultural competition, and experimentation in lifestyles, and violence. This time of turbulence and turmoil calls out to those of us with half a century of life experience to contribute our values, visions, talents, and wisdom to the building of a more just, peaceful, and humane world. The future is calling us. That call is part of our challenge in designing our lives after fifty.

A third factor that complicates planning for the third age is the continued breakdown of traditional patterns of the life course. We grew up in a society in which it was expected that we would pass through predictable, age-graded stages. A general view has assumed that men went to school, got through adolescence, started work, got married, tried for promotions, started a family, had kids and then grandkids, retired, and became old. Women mostly stayed home. Life was structured. Everything in its place.

But shortly before we got to the twenty-first century, a structured life was a thing of the past. People increasingly leave work to go back to school, change jobs and careers, move away from home, get divorced and remarried, experiment with new lifestyles, have several families, and wonder how to advance in careers when career ladders have been removed by corporate restructuring. In the past forty years women have made big changes in the old structure, changes that have affected all of us.

The old assumption that the life course moves upward to a peak, only to descend, is outdated. The ups and downs of our lives often resemble the graphs of a volatile stock market. Our aged-graded society is becoming one in which age is often irrelevant. As life structures we had taken for granted collapse, the question, “What next?” stirs up more confusion than clarity. “The future ain’t what it used to be,” as Casey Stengel raved. But the good news is that with greater turbulence, uncertainty, and an indeterminate future we have more freedom to shape a life that can be more fulfilling than the old structures allowed for. And more reason for trying to do so.

To respond to the challenges facing you after fifty, you need a new perspective. Twenty years of research show us possibilities and potential that have not yet appeared on most life radar screens. Amid historical changes, all of us are also experiencing a change in the shape of the life course. A new life space has been opening up before aging kicks in. History has placed us on a third age frontier that provides challenges for which most of us are unprepared. If we meet those challenges well, we can transform the whole second half of our lives. Just how we—you—might do this is what this book is about.

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