



# TUNED IN AND TURNED ON THE NEW IMAGE OF AGING

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*WITH PURPOSE: GOING FROM SUCCESS TO SIGNIFICANCE  
IN WORK AND LIFE*

I first became interested in the study of aging, maturity and retirement more or less by accident. It was 1973, and I was 23, living and teaching at the Esalen Institute in Big Sur, California. I was completing my doctorate and working on my first book, *Bodymind*. I was asked by Dr. Gay Luce, who was working on creating an innovative new human potential training program, if I'd be interested in partnering with her.

I decided to move to Berkeley to join Dr. Luce in crafting this program. It was going to be a yearlong comprehensive holistic curriculum, very different from the weekend workshops and two-hour lectures that were becoming popular. Before it even got off the ground, it struck Gay that in our youth-focused culture, nobody was using any of these innovative therapeutic techniques with the elderly. She asked if I'd be open to joining her. As a young man in my early 20s, the idea of working with the elderly didn't initially hold much charm for me. I liked being with people my own age and also doing programs for people in their 30s and 40s. I told Gay I would get the project started and then move on.

## NEW IMAGE OF AGING

But I got hooked—and have been hooked for 35 years. Once I was in the project, I became absolutely fascinated with older people. I realized that if you could see past the way they dressed, the wrinkles and gray hair, these were often towering figures, seasoned men and women who had a vast perspective on life. Many had a kind of homegrown wisdom that intrigued me.

With funding from the National Institutes of Health, our Berkeley-based Sage Project became the nation's first preventive health research program focusing exclusively on older adults. Our subjects, who ranged in age from 60 to 90, were divided into groups of 12 and met twice each week in four-hour sessions over the course of a year. During these meetings, participants

were introduced to yoga, meditation, aerobics, stress management, biofeedback, proper nutrition, art, movement and dream therapy, and were encouraged to share their thoughts, feelings, and progress with other group members in an open atmosphere.

Our project became extremely successful. Before I knew it, I was being invited all over the world to speak about a “new image of aging.”

Soon I began to be interested not only in the elderly, but also in the journey of aging itself. I was curious about how we get to be the people we become, about the choices we make along the way that make us either healthy, vibrant and engaged, or unhealthy, impoverished and disconnected.

Through my research and travels, I would meet people in their 70s who were poor but hadn't always been so, and they could describe the bad moves that had left them impoverished. It became increasingly obvious to me that to a great extent, we ourselves make the decisions, consciously or not, that lead us to who we'll become in our later years.

## THE AGE WAVE IS COMING

During the early 1980s, I was struck by the demographic piece of the puzzle. I realized that because of increasing longevity and declining fertility, but most importantly because of the aging of the baby boom, America would be experiencing an unprecedented “age wave.” It also

occurred to me that we had shaped our world in every way around the form and fit of who we had always been—which was *young*. In the decades to come, I saw that we were going to have a world in which the typefaces would be too small, where doorknobs would have to be replaced by door levers, where the length of time it takes for the traffic lights to change would be too quick and the auditory range on our telephones and

television would be out of sync with aging ears.

I thought, “How will housing and community design be impacted? Is our healthcare system prepared for the coming pandemics of chronic disease? Could our political system restrain the demands that tens of millions of elder boomers would place on the social and economic infrastructure? What will become of retirement? Who might we each become—thanks

to increasing longevity? And, what would be the special *purpose* of these extra years of life?” All these ideas started flooding my mind, and that flood hasn't stopped—not for one day in all of these years.

## MIDDLESCENCE

It struck me that all of life was going to have to be recharted: “old age” would be moved back to 75 or even 80—and there would be a new middle zone of life, which I began calling *middlescence*.

Today, as people begin reaching their 50th birthdays, they are no longer turning the corner to old age as they had done in our grandparents'

time. Instead, it is becoming a time of continued vitality with an appetite for new beginnings and personal reinvention. So we're not simply living longer, we've invented a new life stage—with more to come. People tend to assume that living longer simply means *being old* longer. I'm convinced that our entire concept of how we live our lives is shifting. This is an entirely new landscape that we've never charted before.

Historically, we've lived what I call the *linear life plan*: first you learn; then you have a period of intense work for three or four decades; and then, if you're fortunate enough to have a bit of longevity, you have a period of time to rest and relax a bit before you die.

But that's not what people are doing anymore. Instead, people are going back to school, or quitting their jobs and starting whole new careers. Finding themselves widowed or divorced at 60, they're thinking, maybe it's not too late to fall in love again.

We're starting to think in terms of a *cyclic* life plan. It is becoming a story not of the rise and fall of an individual, but of continual rebirth and reinvention.

## RETIRING RETIREMENT

My company, Age Wave (www.AgeWave.com) recently conducted a massive study that found about 75 percent of boomers would like to work in retirement. Many want to work at something that will stoke their fires again. They want more schedule flexibility and a better balance between work and leisure. Fully 60 percent said they'd like to begin a whole new career.

And many studies now show that money is *not* the main reason people want to remain engaged longer. Money is typically the second or third reason, but the main reasons are *mental stimulation* and *the feeling of making a contribution*.

Most people now seek a version of maturity that's still turned on, one where we're socially connected

and our mind is engaged, where we're continuing to be productive and useful. Too often, our twentieth-century version of maturity left out the crucial element of *purpose*. For many of us, stepping to the sidelines and “retiring” just isn't enough. We want to be involved in something that feels meaningful, that has purpose, that allows us to feel lit up and turned on.

It is my heartfelt belief that living a longer life, as we certainly will in an age of advanced medicine and unprecedented information about healthy living, isn't simply a matter of playing longer or working longer—but of reaching a place where you have gathered enough life experiences and perhaps the personal freedom to dedicate the decades of life still before you to doing good things for your family, community, country, and the world.

## RISE OF PHILANTHROPRENEURIALISM

Not surprisingly, the social purpose of philanthropy is, like the institution of retirement, undergoing a profound change. Across the globe, a new generation of givers wants innovative solutions, and they demand swift and measurable results to the problems they care the most about. Millions of common

people are using their skills, smarts and energy to support, fund or staff personalized initiatives dedicated to causes that speak to their souls. They want to give back a talent, share what they've learned, and see the impact they make. Traditional charities and volunteer opportunities don't necessarily turn them on. So they are crafting their own, a phenomenon that I have named “philanthropreneuring.”

To be a philanthropreneur, you don't need boatloads of dollars. You just need time, desire, and compassion, and you may never have those things in greater abundance than you do right now. Perhaps your kids have moved out, or soon will. Retirement—or partial retirement—might beckon you. You are no doubt eager to explore the vast leisure opportunities before you. But you have the time and personal assets to devote to a higher purpose, too.

*The world teems with organizations that can use your donations of experience and/or money for specific purposes that you care about. We're way past the days of large charitable organizations with mostly soup-kitchen roles to offer. Such volunteers are still needed, of course, and quite valuable. But you might get a lot more out of dreaming up a charity's new slogan or rescuing*

*injured wildlife in the mountains or coaching the local basketball (or public speaking) team or entering the Peace Corps—or using your business skills to make an organization run more efficiently.*

Don't undervalue the skills and connections that have come to you through your life experiences. Not everybody knows how to weld a pipe, run a procurement division, write a press release, raise money, give an injection, pilot a plane, interpret law, teach a class, organize a brainstorming meeting or fix a computer. Someone out there can benefit from what you know, and it can be a blast passing it on. Now is the time to step up and rethink how you want your life to function, and how you might fit service to others into it.

## HOW WILL YOU USE YOUR LIFE?

In 1977, I was on a book tour through Denmark. Shortly after arriving in Copenhagen I got an invitation to meet with Denmark's renowned octogenarian geriatrician, Dr. Esther Mueller. At lunch, we exchanged the usual small talk and then our conversation turned to professional concerns and issues. Things were going well, and then out of nowhere, she said, “Ken, you have a keen interest in what will become a

hugely important field as the global population ages. However, what I really want to know is this: how will you use your life?”

I wasn't sure what she meant and asked, “You mean in terms of what I'm going to make of my career?”

“No.”  
“Do you mean in terms of the books I may write?”

“No.”

I thought something was lost in translation. What did she mean?

“Ken, how will you *use* your life?” she repeated.

Although I fumbled with my response at the time, I realized that she was trying to get at something deep. Now that I am near to completing my sixth decade of life, I have come to understand the point of Dr. Mueller's question. We each have one life to live. There might be 60 years of it or 80 or 100. But it's one life and it can have a higher purpose. In fact, it should have a higher purpose in order to be a life truly worth living. And so I will ask you—how will you use your life? ♦

*Note: sections of this article were adapted from With Purpose: Going from Success to Significance in Work and Life by Ken Dychtwald and Daniel J. Kadlec (Harper Collins, March, 2009)*