

Creating a Great Rest of Your Life

Contribution to society, meaning, and happiness might be the three key ingredients. Start thinking about how to incorporate them now.

by **Marshall Goldsmith**

Frances Hesselbein is the former national executive director of the Girl Scouts of the United States and is now chairman of the Leader to Leader Institute. Management guru Peter Drucker considered Hesselbein to be the greatest executive he had ever met. She's also a wonderful human being.

Alex Von Bidder is co-owner of the Four Seasons in New York - one of the most famous and successful restaurants in the world. Alex is also a master yoga teacher and one of the deepest thinkers that I've ever known.

On two different occasions (once at my home in Rancho Santa Fe and once in New York), Frances, Alex, and I had the unique opportunity to spend a day and a half with two different sets of eight extremely accomplished people. The major topic of our open dialogue was "Creating a great rest of my life."

Lonely at the Top

The participants at our sessions included leaders from the corporate, military, and human-services sectors, along with entrepreneurs and investment bankers. Some had already made the transition from their day jobs or sold their business, some were near a transition period, and others were planning to continue in their present occupation for several years. In each session, participants' chairs were placed in a circle - with no furniture in the middle - no PowerPoint presentations, no computers, and no notes. It was just human beings talking to each other. The dialogue was amazingly open, candid, and supportive.

There's a lot of truth to the saying "It's lonely at the top." If you're the chief executive officer of a publicly traded, multibillion-dollar corporation, you can't stand up and share your existential angst with the world. You have to be "on" almost all of the time. This is an important part of being a professional and being a responsible leader.

But CEOs are just as human as the rest of us. They, too, have parents with Alzheimer's, spouses who get angry, kids with problems, and customers who can be very demanding. They have the same kinds of aspirations and concerns that come with growing older.

Not Looking for Leisure

During our time together, these leaders loved the opportunity to just be human beings and talk about their lives, their hopes, and their fears.

Looking from the outside in, it might be logical to assume that these people would be looking

forward to retirement and a life of leisure. Wrong! None of these great leaders had the slightest desire to "retire" in the traditional sense.

People live a lot longer than they used to. Today, if people have the ambition and energy to achieve great success in any field, it's unlikely that this ambition and energy will just stop when they reach 65. The prospect of sleeping late, living on the beach, improving their golf scores, going on cruises, and playing all day held very little allure for our participants. If they just wanted to retire, they easily could have afforded to years earlier.

More than Just Money

In our discussions about growing older, six issues came up as key in preparing for our next transition in life. Here they are (not in order of importance): wealth, health, relationships, contribution, meaning, and happiness.

While some participants had more wealth than others, none believed money was a key factor in "creating a great rest of my life." Everyone agreed that while money can be used to pay for nice homes, fast cars, and fine dining, it can't be used to purchase meaning. Studies on happiness have also shown that, beyond a middle-income level, the amount of money one has bears almost no correlation to how happy one is.

While everyone agreed that health was critically important, this group of 16 people was remarkably healthy. Health concerns were seldom discussed. In fact, several people commented on the fact that with good luck, a healthy lifestyle, and medical care, they might well live 20 or 30 years after leaving their "primary" occupation.

The Big Three

Everyone clearly valued relationships with friends and family members and saw that these relationships were a key factor in their future wellbeing. In spite of their amazingly busy schedules and demanding lives, these people had very positive, stable relationships with friends and family. Relationship concerns were not a major topic.

Yet of the six themes, the three that were most commonly discussed were contribution, meaning, and happiness. All three were so closely related that they were almost impossible to separate.

All of the participants at our sessions realized how blessed they were and wanted to give back in their later years and make a positive contribution to the world and leave a legacy. They wanted to help others in the same way that mentors, teachers, parents, and friends had helped them.

Each person wanted to continue doing work that had true meaning. No one wanted to become a "used to be," in the sense of "Didn't you used to be a big CEO?" or "Didn't you used to be an important person?" No one wanted to rest on their laurels while reviewing their scrapbooks and awards for 20 or 30 years. They all wanted to continue making a real difference in the world.

New and Improved Lives

Finally, all of the participants wanted to be happy. They realized that, at least for them, true happiness can't be bought, it has to be lived. They believed that, at a deeper level, happiness couldn't be separated from meaning and contribution, but could only come from meaning and contribution.

A lot has happened in the few months that have passed since these meetings. One investment banker is still at the bank, but is now working exclusively on projects that make the world a better place. One executive is still leading, but is now leading a different major corporation, where he has even more opportunity to serve. One adviser is still advising, but he's now advising people on how to have great lives, not just make more money.

I'm very lucky person. Many years ago, one of my coaches, Richard Leider, taught me that reflecting on life and purpose is a process that should start when we're young - and never stop. I also had the privilege of serving on the board of the Peter Drucker Foundation for 10 years and being able to observe Peter Drucker. Peter worked up until his death at age 95. He was never interested in retiring. He was never a "used to be." Through his example, I learned that making a difference means a lot more than making a living.

Think about your life, the rest of your life. Now is a great time to start planning. Begin by challenging yourself. How can you make a contribution? How can you find meaning? What will really make you happy? You may well have 20 or 30 years to live after your present work is finished. How can you make this time count - for yourself and the people around you?