

# After 50 It's Up to Us

*Developing the Skills and Agility We'll Need*

**George H. Schofield, Ph.D.**



**Foreword by Richard Nelson Bolles,**  
*author of **What Color Is Your Parachute?***

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## *Dedication*

*For Linda de Mello, my wife and partner, with deep appreciation for her constant and unconditional support as I pursued my own interests, skills, and agility after fifty.*

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## Foreword

The author of this book, my friend George Schofield, is a man on a quest.

This is a decade when the first of baby boomers are turning fifty, a trickle that will soon turn into a floodtide. George—who is himself past fifty—is searching for tools that will help all those who are facing this milestone. He quotes some of the true pioneers in this research: Ken Dychtwald, William Bridges, Po Bronson, Studs Terkel, William Sadler, John Rowe and Robert Kahn, and Betty Friedan. He quotes the latter approvingly, where she speaks of this time of life as a stage “where there are no prescribed role models to follow, no guideposts, no rigid rules or visible rewards....”

George wants to find role models and guideposts. Toward this end, he is conducting endless interviews with those he calls modern-day “After-fifty Pioneers,” to see if he can discern from their stories the tools that he, and the others, now need. He asked them such questions as “major fear about aging after fifty,” and “major daily struggle after fifty,” and “major surprise about life after fifty.”

The interviews continue (you can go to his website, [www.georgeschofield.com](http://www.georgeschofield.com), and contribute your own story). But, with enough interviews under his belt, George has made this book at least his interim report.

“After-fifty,” he has concluded, is a time best described as an “open life space,” in which we need a greater vocabulary. His contribution toward that vocabulary is words that dominate the pages of this book: “skills” and “agility” and “the Wall” and “paradox” and “identity anchors” and “strong convoys” vs. “weak convoys.” He identifies the Four Most Essential Abilities, the Three Truths, and the 10 Key Realities After Fifty.

People like to talk about making plans—for retirement, or whatever. George is wiser. He knows the truth that Martin Luther King Jr. once wrote about, the truth that the genius of life involves learning how to deal with interruptions—interruptions to our expectations, to our dreams, and to our plans. And so, for everyone searching not for planning but for tools to deal with interruptions after fifty, this book should prove enlightening, helpful, and inspiring.

— Richard Nelson Bolles, author,  
*What Color Is Your Parachute?*

*Begin here at the beginning. By itself, reading  
won't be enough. Moving straight into action  
without reading won't work either.*

## *Introduction*

# Developing the Skills and Agility We'll Need for the Rest of Our Lives

### *On the Unfolding Road After Fifty*

If you'd like to connect with experience, tenacity, and inspiration, try interviewing a wide variety of individuals between the ages of fifty and ninety-seven. In doing the research for this book I did just that. It was my privilege to hear the honest life stories and expectations of people pioneering life after fifty for themselves. Their wisdom is the heart of this book.

What inspired me was the participants' consistent sense of excitement about the opportunity to make the next part of their lives rich and rewarding. Their predictable concerns about aging and financial security in later life were more than offset by the realization that, after fifty, we bring so much more to the table than ever before: the sum of our experience, our depth of understanding, our self-confidence and determination, our appreciation of how transient and therefore how precious life is—in short, our hard-won accumulated wisdom. We earned this, and we not only deserve to create exciting, fulfilling lives after fifty, but we owe it to ourselves to make the very best of the endless possibilities awaiting us.

The question we face is much bigger than when or whether we retire. We have to figure out what we want our lives to be like, and remember that no matter what we select it won't be permanent. It will have to change and adapt as we grow older,

and so will we. The “there” our parents planned to arrive at won't exist for us.

There are lots of examples of success to follow, and too many choices, too much change, and too many unknowns for us to assume we can always know in advance what we'll have to be good at as our lives unfold from here. Even with great planning, we'll need to be more agile than ever. We'll have to invent our lives and aging for ourselves, probably more than once. We don't yet know what abilities we could need later. Control is much easier than exercising our influence intelligently, but we have only so much control of our unfolding road. Realistically, we'll need to be flexible, adapt on a daily basis, pay close attention, and develop the right skills and agility.

### *Meet Some Truths For After-fifty Pioneers*

*The problem is, first of all, how to break through the cocoon of our illusory youth and risk a new stage in life, where there are no prescribed role models to follow, no guideposts, no rigid rules or visible rewards, to step out into the true existential unknown of these new years of life now open to us, and to find our terms for living it.*

Betty Friedan, *The Fountain of Age*

After fifty can be a time of opportunity and shift. At some point most of us experience:

- emancipation by the departure of grown children;
- a shift in the importance and place of work in our lives and sense of ourselves;
- awakening of new or resurgent interests together with some loss of interest in activities we've pursued for years;

- evaporation of roles we've fulfilled dutifully for decades;
- accomplishment or abandonment of long-held goals;
- death of our parents, death of peers or heroes, and even the death of some of our previous opponents and enemies
- release from some of the financial responsibility for others we carried for many years;
- increase in financial pressure with the sense that we're running out of time to provide for ourselves in the long term.

With these opportunities and shifts comes taking unprecedented responsibility for ourselves. The research for this book disclosed that many of us will immediately refill with busyness the open life space created by some of these shifts. The courageous ones among us will live with that newly opened space for a while. All the individuals I interviewed, who sat awhile with the open space, inevitably noticed, often with some discomfort, being faced with three truths for after-fifty pioneers:

### **Truth #1**

*We have the first real opportunity in years to focus on ourselves, and there's no one else to hold accountable if we're not doing it successfully or at all.*

By the time we reach our early fifties, most of us have devoted our lives to fulfilling a variety of roles: son, daughter, friend, worker, professional, parent, homeowner, neighbor, volunteer. We don't want to abandon these now so much as we want to be real about making choices for our future that we took for granted earlier in our busy lives. Aging will happen anyway. Should we take care of our health? Absolutely. Manage our finances well? Of course. Should we develop and enjoy stimulating interests? Certainly. Will life go totally according to plan? Probably not—it seldom has before. We simply want to focus on our choices and

responsibilities each day in a more conscious way than we ever have before. We want to pioneer for ourselves, not live someone else's highly marketed vision of what we should do, who we should be, and what we should buy.

In our fifties, many of us experience the need to be more deliberate and conscious about our planning: financial condition, physical health, intentions, activities and interests, and whom we choose to spend our time with. Along with that new emphasis on planning come our forays into a huge number of people and companies wanting to provide us all the specialized planning services we can imagine: financial planning, healthcare planning, residential planning, social planning, activity planning, and plans for parts of our future lives we hadn't even imagined, much less thought we'd need to plan.

Most of us, hopefully, are doing the appropriate kinds of financial, legal, and health planning. We're using the services of the many fine planners whose expertise we need to anticipate our future financial and health needs.

Those among us who do all the right planning will eventually notice, often with some discomfort and a sense of familiarity, that they're faced with the second of the three truths for after-fifty pioneers:

### ***Truth #2***

*Solid planning is imperative, and life is often what happens while we're making other plans.*

Despite our best efforts at planning and getting it all organized, the unexpected arises, derailing our carefully crafted plans. We'll need to be great at flexibility, being able to work effectively with what is, sometimes accepting it and sometimes changing it.

In our fifties, many of us find ourselves at the peak of our game so far, our abilities honed and our experience stacked in accessible and usable form. We've achieved a certain amount of success and have even come to grips with some of our

limitations. If we're paying attention, we have a heightened awareness of what's really going on with us.

With this awareness can come the realization that in our dramatically changing world, our movement through our fifties and beyond will call our accumulated skills into question. The courageous among us will see and admit to the third of the three truths for after-fifty pioneers:

### ***Truth #3***

*We have developed abilities and approaches to life that have made us reasonably successful by age fifty, but those might not be what make us successful far beyond fifty. In fact, the abilities and approaches we've relied on the most before fifty could work against us later.*

We've assumed roles, built lives with many forms of accomplishment, gotten good at what it took to succeed, and out of that mix have created identities and ways of being in the world. Nonetheless, I know from the many interviews I conducted for this book that the strengths we developed before fifty might not necessarily be the strengths that serve us best later in life.

### *We All Arrive at After Fifty Carrying Our Biographies and Expertise*

By the time we pass fifty we've accumulated a lot of experience, several biographic segments, and a lot of expertise that comes from living our biographies one day at a time. In the midst of our daily efforts and busyness, it's easy to lose track of what we're really good at and what serves us well. Sometimes we need to stop for a little while and do some reflection on (1) our different biographic chapters; and (2) the expertise we developed in each of them. Chapters can be chronological;



they can also be thematic, capturing themes that repeat periodically in our lives.

Our biographies are diverse. Yours is unique to you even if it shares some characteristics with others'. Here's an analysis I did of my own life's learning through my chapters:

### **Biographic Chapter**

I became a single parent when my sons were under eight, certainly not what I planned. This was when the world still thought women couldn't run businesses and men couldn't parent alone. I learned behaviors and identities associated with both male and female parents. By the time my sons were in their late teens, they'd given me a full understanding of the difference between control and influence. I learned to show up every day and be as able as I could with what was in front of me. I didn't remarry until long after the boys were out on their own.

### **Expertise**

Expertise in finding the next task to accomplish or obstacle to outwit. Expertise in balancing control and influence in any given situation.

Expertise in a combination of: (1) ability to set myself aside and listen deeply; (2) genuine interest in what the person has to say; and (3) fascination with others' interests that I know little or nothing about.

Expertise in anticipating, but not inserting myself into, what I could see flowing into my son's lives—positive or negative.

A BA in Business, an MA in Counseling, an MA in Adult Learning, and a Ph.D. in Human and Organizational Development.

Expertise in research, writing, and speaking on the wide range of topics that interest me.

Expertise in human development, the knowledge of how we grow and adapt, or fail to, over our life spans. The price

of this is the stress involved when a client isn't yet ready to do the work, but is obviously beginning to suffer.

Expertise in organizational development, knowing how organizations grow and adapt, or fail to, over their life spans.

Expertise in seeking new ideas and possibilities, the price of which can be failure to see and appreciate what I already know.

### Biographic Chapter

A long-standing reputation for work with career management and job-search clients. Individuals and corporations both have career paths with often-shared flex points, though we usually don't think of it that way. I was cited in the "Finding Help: A Sampler" appendix of Richard Bolles's groundbreaking *What Color Is Your Parachute?*

### Expertise

Expertise in applied research: What's really going on here; what's it costing us not to change; what are our options; which are the best ones; and how do we implement them?

Expertise in understanding and working with individuals and couples who've moved past the job-search into the far more demanding and creative search for the right fit and opportunities for work in middle and later adulthood.

### Biographic Chapter

I earned my stripes over thirty-five years of full-time employment in the corporate world, from vice president at the Bank of America, to senior regional leader in a multinational consulting company, to having my own company specializing in research-based business solutions.

## Expertise

Expertise in the realities of the corporate world of work and change at individual, team, and organizational levels.

*Expertise in moving on from common questions to those whose answers yield effective and integrative solutions.*

When I did this exercise, I asked, “If I’m such an expert, shouldn’t I be excused from having to do this investigation of my unfolding road after fifty?” No! There’s no testing out of life, even for an expert in something.

I felt led into doing the research for this book, and not just for my own learning and development. My professional and academic backgrounds gave me an intense interest in:

- getting much clearer on the questions I need to ask myself about living a skillful, agile life after fifty, the quality of the answers depending on the quality of the questions;
- the widespread, similar searching I could see my after-fifty friends, neighbors, and colleagues doing to identify the right questions and workable answers for themselves.

Now is the time to start a notebook, which you’ll be using repeatedly as you read on. Begin by listing your expertise from your own biography. You can use the same two-column format I used. You can group your chapters by stages of your life, roles you’ve played, themes that have run through your biography, or any other form of grouping that works for you. When you’re done, discuss what you’ve written with someone you trust who is:

1. interested in you and your development;
2. able to separate his or her sense of personal okay-ness from what you’ve written;
3. likely to be insightful about you, what has served you well in the past, and what you might need to develop in the future.

My research started out just for me, but it turned out to be this book for all of us approaching or past fifty. In the beginning, I had little interest in *aging* or *elderly* per se. Information on avoiding aging in one way or another is plastered all over the advertising we see. There's plenty of information on aging and elderly, and a mountain of literature on financial planning, gerontology, keeping busy and active, health and healthcare planning, next place or career, retirement, travel, and the coming generational conflict over life space, resources, and power.

My approach began with an attitude of "I don't know what I don't know." After doing enough interviews to confirm my direction and suspicions, I was struck by how little practical, example-based information there is out there on "after fifty it's up to us" and on skills and agility, so I decided to continue the research and see if a helpful book might emerge.

I began questioning my colleagues, my wife, and my closest friends. Almost everyone's first response involved "the importance of planning." The second response was "Of course, planning can only take you so far." This echoed my corporate consulting work, in which people say, as they hand me the organization chart, "Of course, this isn't the way things really work around here."

I found I wasn't alone in my search for answers in a changing world; lots of people around me were asking: "Who do I want to be when I reach age seventy or eighty or ninety?" "How do I learn to operate in the world as aging becomes a greater part of my life, even though I feel nowhere close to old now?" "What will I have to be good at? Will it be the same as in the past?" "Do I want more of the same, or do I want something really different?" "I'm overwhelmed with the growing amount to read and learn. How do I choose where to devote my attention?"

Eventually, every research participant got around to talking about the importance of *skills* and *agility*.

The network of friends and research participants—almost all of whom decided to actively help recruit others—grew. Participants, ranging from fifty to ninety-seven years of age, were from all over the US and from many walks of life. Each completed a research survey that asked for both quantitative and qualitative data. Each sat with me and talked—some would call it an interview—for between ninety and 120 minutes. I recorded the conversations.

I was after a substantial number of diverse participants who would provide representative insights about skills, agility, and experiential knowledge that I knew lived in their stories and expectations. Knowing how very individual our lives are—though we share aspects in common—I was after the questions that provoke answers that come closest to wisdom.

In the end, all the participants were everyday people who were enormously generous with their time. They didn't have extraordinary education or wealth or expertise in human development. They were all thoughtful in their individual ways, and all interested in pushing their own envelopes of abilities and possibilities.

As an experienced interviewer and human development expert, I thought I had reasonable expectations about what people would have to say. I wasn't prepared for their outpouring of energy, curiosity, reflection, candidness, vulnerability, and pioneering that our working together produced.

This is a practical, hands-on book about skills and agility, and the difference they can make in the quality of our lives from fifty on. You'll read about the importance of planning, and even more about the capacity to live life well as it inevitably goes not quite according to plan. You're going to meet some very interesting people.

I'm hoping to inspire reflective, informed conversation within and between readers now that would otherwise wait until a later time, when learning and adaptability might be much harder to master. I'm hoping to bring new vocabulary to the

conversations we'll need to have, for which there's not yet enough new language and few proven models of skills and agility after fifty.

Finally, this is a book that combines:

1. pioneering ideas about skills and agility and the key abilities needed after fifty;
2. real stories of people from their fifties into their eighties;
3. the opportunity for you to evaluate and learn from their stories;
4. the opportunity for you to see, work with, and discuss your own skill and agility and the responsibilities and choices that accompany them.

I guaranteed anonymity to my research participants and have honored that. The composite people you'll meet in this book all tell their truth. They're courageous in their willingness to share their stories, and are committed to using their skills and agility. It's my fond hope that from understanding their stories, we can improve the quality of our individual and collective pioneering.

## *An Invitation To Join in the Skills and Agility Conversation*

A lot of people felt passion for my research. This book is a way to share the results and join in a longer, larger dialog that can benefit all of us at fifty and beyond. Please write to me; go to my website, [www.georgeschofield.com](http://www.georgeschofield.com). Tell me something new from your experience that will add to the conversation. For example:

- your own stories of skills and agility beyond fifty;
- what you're discovering that you need to honor yet leave behind beyond fifty;
- the best examples of your own skills and agility beyond fifty;
- what has surprised you the most about your learning beyond fifty;
- your self-observations that would make a great addition to the next edition of *After Fifty It's Up To Us*.

My thanks to all the research participants and readers of this book for being such great companions as we pioneer the rest of our lives together. Your wisdom and experience can inform and help all of us.

*George H. Schofield*  
San Francisco, California  
January 2007





*The Wall is our friend.  
It may shake us up as it gets our attention,  
but real friendship and value are seldom free.*

## Chapter 1

# Running Into The Wall Again

Is this book for you? Here's a quick test:

- Are you approaching or past fifty?
- Are you willing to invest a reasonable amount of time and energy in your future?
- Will the rest of your life go according to plan?
- Do you have all the abilities and awareness on which you can build reliable skills and agility for use in a rapidly changing world after fifty?

If your answers are yes, yes, no, and no, then this book is for you.

I didn't plan to tell my own story in this book; the stories of others seemed much more intriguing. Yet every person I interviewed asked how I'd become interested in the topic. When I answered, they all said, "Your story needs to be the first chapter!" It wasn't just about me, but my life was the starting point. I observed for years that I needed to practice in my own career what I taught people to do in theirs. I decided to honor that same commitment to integrity in writing the first chapter of *After Fifty It's Up To Us*. I knew mine was called "my life" for a good reason, so, as I began the interviews, I started telling them, "It's called *your life* for a reason." We all that agreed this ownership was a starting place.

I grew up in a typical American city in the 1940s and '50s, graduating from high school in 1962, slightly ahead of the baby boomers. I lived a life common to many young people in that

era. Our family drove Chevrolets, Dodges, and Mercurys. We attended church, in our case Protestant.

My parents' developmental experiences, like most parents of the era, included the Great Depression and World War II. Not surprisingly, they had great faith in institutions and a huge need for structure and order. My parents were honorable and deeply human in their own ways. While I might not wish some of my early experiences for my children, if I hadn't had the parents and the childhood I had, I couldn't be who I am today.

My parents impressed upon me the same great truths that many of my peers, during our interviews, said their parents had told them:

- You can tell us anything.
- Climb the ladder of success.
- Wisdom comes with age and experience.
- The keys to success are perseverance and hard work.
- Take care of your employer well and he/they/it will take care of you.
- Do as I say, not as I do.
- Boys will be boys.
- Know your place.
- Nice boys don't eat with their hands.
- Save some money; you never know when you'll need it.
- The communists are out to get us.
- Wear clean underwear when you go to the doctor.

Dated as some of these sound today, they were central to how my parents thought of themselves and everything worthwhile in our lives. They couldn't have known that many of their great truths would turn out not to be true for my generation.

While I was in high school and still living at home, I discerned that there was going to be a large gap between my

generation/world and my parents'. I understood that this had been true between my parents and their parents; the differences showed when the generations were together and unguarded. But I couldn't figure out what it all meant for me and my future.

So I launched into the '60s and '70s with my 1950s skills and values. Life did the rest. I found myself pursuing a number of tracks, most successfully, and found myself periodically lost and without my accustomed bearings. Along the way I did what many of my peers did: went to college, got married, had children, bought a house, developed a career, got divorced, and raised children as a single parent. I was far more liberal than my parents, though much less liberal than many. Until my father died at age eighty-four he would regularly say to me, "How did you get to be so liberal? Where did I go wrong?" I developed interests and activities, kept some, dropped others, and along the way, while I wasn't looking, I got older and developed a set of values appropriate to me and my life.

One of the things I most admire about my former brother-in-law, Mike, a retired automotive executive, is that he worked for the same company, doing variations of the same work, for thirty years. If it was in his character, it certainly wasn't in mine. The only thing I did thirty years running was devote myself to being a good parent.

Periodically, I would collide with The Wall. It happened before I got my divorce. It happened when I went to graduate school for the first time, and again when I earned my later-in-life Ph.D., and yet again when my pubescent sons drilled into me their wisdom about the difference between control and influence. It happened before each small and large career change. It happened when the bank I worked for broke the postwar contract for trust and mutual service between company and staff. It happened when I tried to save my mother's life and failed.

The Wall has played an important role in my life. It's never harmed me, though it's had to get emphatic to get my attention

from time to time. It always knows before I do, and consistently gives me what psychologist Chuck Maurer taught me was my “blinding glimpse of the obvious.” Of course, I had to be willing to pay attention for The Wall to be able to help me. While I’ve grown attached to my wall, not everyone has need of a wall and its capacity for temporary drama, attention getting, and promotion of learning. Still, it’s possible that more people could occasionally use a wall.

In 2002 I met up with my old friend The Wall again. This collision felt particularly dramatic because I was fifty-eight and didn’t fancy feeling surprised and without my usual sense of bearings at that age. I imagined I should have it all together and never find myself lost or in need of The Wall again. After all, fifty-eight!

I didn’t see The Wall until I felt the impact. I had vaguely sensed it moving toward me while I was moving toward it, but, being someone who prefers the hope end of the continuum to the fear end, I hadn’t really looked up. Fifty-eight doesn’t sound so old until you’re there, still thinking of yourself as thirty-five. I no longer knew all the popular music. I clung to “You’re welcome” in a world that had converted to “No problem” while I wasn’t looking. I couldn’t begin to keep up with everything I wanted to read.

My wall is massive, and able to move fast with great agility. It has the word “paradox” spray-painted just above my reach. We’re old colleagues, this wall and I, having collided many times before. My role has been to focus single-mindedly on whatever I’m working on at the time. The Wall’s role has been to place itself in my path at the very moments I’m available to feel the impact and really pay attention to the essential lessons. Of the two of us, The Wall has displayed greater patience, finesse, timing, affection, and wisdom.

The word “Paradox” on The Wall used to be a puzzler. Not anymore. What does it mean for me and the people I interviewed?

### **Examples**

- The freedom and the responsibility of independence;
- The heavy burdens and the huge gifts of parenthood;
- The assurance in religious commitment, and the lack of proof;
- Attachment to permanence, and the inevitability of loss;
- The loss of identity that can come with aging or retirement, and the great possibilities that re-crafting the self can offer if the loss is embraced;
- Being in the Zen-like space midway between non-attachment and total obsession.

This time, a large mirror hung on the wall. Looking back at me from its depths were my father's and mother's eyes, and a fifty-eight-year-old facial expression all my own. The expression was clear: "The developmental work you do now will affect the quality of your life and aging as surely as the nurturing a child receives affects the quality of its adulthood. Remember the paradox. Some important pieces of how you've crafted who you are and how you've operated successfully until now will no longer be effective; instead, they'll get in your way as your fifties turn into your sixties and beyond."

How do you thank a graffiti-sprayed wall and a mirror for their gifts of insight and compassion, difficult as they may be to handle? The answer: cherish the gifts and pass them on.

Here's a piece of a poem by Peggy Hill, whom I regard as a great poet.

*Here we are  
Trailing the patched cloth of our lives  
Finely textured, worn with good use and familiar  
But not always the stuff of sails*

*Giving it all a watchful whirl  
Upon the strange green sea that stretches out before us*

*Relying on the sure hands we've watched  
Knot the ropes beside us for decades  
And two or three foreign navigators enlisted  
For a time, this time, perhaps not more*

*We are free to write as quickly as we please  
These new sea stories  
In most any language that conveys the clearest meaning  
Knowing between the holding fast and letting go  
There will always be a place  
Where the sail snaps taut and sure  
Catching fresh breezes that will carry us between  
Our certainties and our dreams*

The Wall knew my dilemma before I knew it. Part one of my difficulty was clear: I was no longer grounded in what had been solid a few weeks before, yet nothing was wrong and there was nothing to solve. I was apparently right on schedule. Increased awareness and ability after fifty could be mine if I could do the learning without resorting to a problem/solution model.

In the past there had always been another goal. A long-time problem solver, I'd always sought problems for the gifts of their resolution. Now I had changed. Looking at self-help books, I found I didn't need more financial planning, want to "reinvent" myself for another round of career (especially when it meant starting all over again rather than bringing the most useful forward to add to what was to come), didn't need to work with my wife on our marriage or communication, didn't need to find another way to prove myself, and wasn't ready to sacrifice the rich diversity of our life to live primarily in a community of people in my own age, financial, educational, and special-interest groups.

It was scary. I had accomplished most of the things I'd set out to do. Many of the important roles I relied on for my identity and satisfaction—spouse, parent, professional, business owner—were no longer dominant in my sense of myself. Work and

job titles validated me much less than they had. I hadn't given permission for most of these changes to occur.

What disturbed me most was having lots of questions and no answers, but knowing that the search for answers would be about building skill and agility, not solutions and change. I didn't want an upgraded future that looked like just another round of goals and steps, problems to solve, and challenges to overcome. I didn't want a plan that looked like an extension of my past. I'd been there. I wasn't nearly ready to "retire." Life after fifty needed to bring the best from earlier years and introduce a newness I couldn't yet define. And the right combination would probably continue to change for a long time to come.

Part two of my dilemma was less clear: could I learn to live with a changing balance of enough planning and adaptability (which I later came to call skills and agility) to steer an intelligent course between shorelines that were no longer stable?

I was busy in daily tasks, yet these subjects needed some high-quality time. To get it, I decided to run away from home. It was time to do the work of paying attention. My wife rented a condo for me in the Coachella Valley of Southern California. I drove down from San Francisco and stayed a week, alone and uninterrupted. What I discovered when I was willing to really engage was that I wasn't alone on this journey *and* I was again going to have to begin from the position of "I don't know what I don't know," rather than from my preferred position of "I know what I don't know, so let's go solve it."

My wife and I had agreed that toward the end of my sojourn she would fly down for a weekend, and we would then drive home together. By the time she arrived I'd had several days to reflect. I had covered the walls of the condo with sheets of paper, written and organized and written on some more at all hours as the spirit moved me. When she got there I gave her a guided tour, complete with visual aids, of what was going on with me and where this could be taking me.



Here are the highlights:

- Acknowledging that I'd done most of the things on the accomplishment list I was handed as a little boy, the list to which I added something new as soon as something else was checked off. This completion can be disorienting in a land where challenges and accomplishment are the stuff of life.
- A hatred of the boxes I had created, living in appropriate roles for my entire life. I had created professional and personal opportunities to match my personality and needs as I went along. Now I could see myself resisting every role that felt in any way like a box. I was going to have to find a way of knowing who I was that wouldn't limit me to roles.
- The new paradox of doing: If I could only be by doing, I could never sit down and enjoy the moment. I could continue doing many of the same things for a while, focusing my attention more on being in a better balance with doing. The continued need for challenges would be okay. I'd need to monitor the only-way-to-be-in-the-world need for goals or achievement.
- Feeling that the world had passed me by in small but telling ways: clinging to "You're welcome"; finding a stick-shift car an unappealing idea; no longer being able to tell one make and model of car from another; and worse yet, not being very interested in cars anymore. Needing more privacy and reflection in the midst of a life otherwise full of the trappings of extroversion; being at the stage of life, as my wife regularly points out, when younger women will not "get" my references to songs, wars, books, cars, or past politicians and political events; having lots of energy and opportunity for risk, with a corresponding awareness of fewer recuperative years than before if something went awry.

- Admitting that I no longer cared so much about the business I'd worked so hard to build; I no longer cared so deeply about a host of roles and proofs that until recently had been essential to my sense of identity and well-being. These still felt important, but had ceased to be the cornerstones of my life and identity.
- The realization that what had made me fairly successful in life until now—how I had created my identity and operated in the world, especially overcoming and seeking the next mountain—would need to be examined in a new light because some things could continue to serve me well after sixty but many would not.
- Appreciating that I had been at significant transition points before, but never at one of such apparently irreversible magnitude, and certainly never with such an array of experience, skills, relationships, and freedom to work with.
- Being joyfully willing to develop and sustain the skills and agility required for the next segment of my life.
- Carrying forward the best of my experience, identity, and ways of operating in the world.
- Discovering additional and more appropriate ways to create, be, and do in coming years.
- Integrating it all into a sense of self and capacity that can be validated by vitality and learning.
- Taking more conscious, active responsibility for myself and the quality of the life I'll live than anyone else will or should take.

The concept of a solid research project about all of this had been born. I wanted more understanding and ability. Only later did the idea of this book come into focus.

Upon our return home, I found myself searching San Francisco for a symbol, something that would capture the need for

developing skills and agility. I found it on a rooftop billboard. I photographed it, marveling at the audacity and shallowness of the billboard's message—a challenge to everyone over fifty. If we believe the billboard, we're only alive when doing. If we're not doing, then we must be less than fully alive. Choice and degrees of doing aren't possible. This is unacceptable to me. The billboard said:

I DO. THEREFORE I AM.

I knew from my research interviews that what was happening to me was similar to what was happening for others—men and women alike. We have a huge desire to continue doing, and paradoxically, our reliance on doing as the sole way of being limits the quality of our lives in the long run. Will doing less mean we're dead? Is doing be our only way to feel alive? I'd found the symbol for skills and agility: bringing forward what would serve me well, leaving behind what wouldn't, and acquiring new, appropriate after-fifty abilities.

It's common before fifty for our identities to be 51 percent or more determined from outside the self: roles, achievement, work, family, attention, attachment, and intention have a heavy influence.

**Example:** Beth Allison, forty-seven, has devoted her life to her employer and her work, and has devoted herself equally to her children. She knows who she is: an employee part of the day and a mother part of the day. Her company is shutting down her office, and her last child is leaving for college. She won't fall apart, but neither will she be able to rely exclusively on those external ways of knowing who she is.

What begins to shift and end after fifty may be the very things that once gave life its greatest meaning. If we're paying attention, we'll discover that there may be a gradual change from being predominantly other-defined to predominantly

self-defined. This shift is a cornerstone of the abilities we'll be working with later.

There's a coming demand for skills and agility for all of us. Members of the baby-boomer generation and people born shortly before and after comprise a cohort that's demonstrated a capacity for personal reinvention and changing the workplace, often successfully expecting that the world will change accordingly.

It might not be as simple as that in the future. Reinvention is often represented as leaving everything behind and starting anew. In fact, the finer and more successful forms of reinvention—according to everyone I interviewed—involve a combination of figuring out what to leave behind, what to bring forward, and what to start learning and experiencing that's new.

Skills and agility may require heightened attention and awareness in each moment as we go forth into the uncharted waters after-fifty.

*Learning is important. Development is essential.  
They aren't necessarily the same thing.*

*“The genius of life involves learning how to deal with interruptions to our expectations, our dreams, and our plans. For everyone searching for tools to deal with interruptions after fifty, this book should prove enlightening and inspiring.”*

— Richard Nelson Bolles, author, *What Color Is Your Parachute?*

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