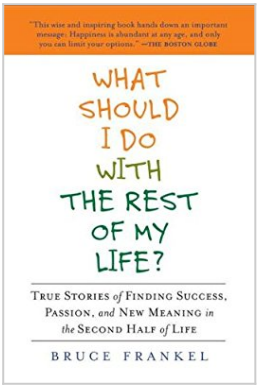

What Should I Do with the Rest of My Life?: True Stories of Finding Success, Passion, and New Meaning in the Second Half of Life

By Bruce Frankel

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Read Bruce Frankel's posts on the Penguin Blog

"This wise and inspiring book hands down an important message: Happiness is abundant at any age, and only you can limit your options."
-The Boston Globe

In today's world, the question "What should I do with my life?" only scratches the surface. Now, more and more people-from baby boomers retiring from their "first act" to people in their forties and fifties reconsidering their careers in a recovering economy-are finding themselves wondering how to find new stimulation and meaningful work over a lifetime. Bringing together a diverse array of stories, veteran journalist Bruce Frankel brings to life a mesmerizing series of profiles of men and women who discovered a new calling, success, or purpose later in life. Brimming with inspiration and humanity, *What Should I Do with the Rest of My Life?* celebrates activists, artists, entrepreneurs, filmmakers, and others who found extraordinary ways to experience true fulfillment in the second half of life.

On these pages, readers will meet a civil servant, laid off at age fifty-two, who enrolled in graduate school, earning a Ph.D. in psychology; a former consultant who began a microfinance program in Africa; a longtime contact-lens grinder who has chiseled twelve hundred stone heads on a property now known as the "Easter Island of the Hudson"; and many others who proved that age is a spark-not a barrier. Full of spirit and plenty of chutzpah, this book shows that anything is possible in any stage of life.

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Editorial Review

Review
Bruce Frankel's upbeat, inspiring, timely book shows how taking a risk and fighting to find a passionate career-at any age-can reinvigorate your life. This should be required reading for anyone starting out, laid off, downsized, or just ready for reinvention."
-Susan Shapiro, author of *Speed Shrinking and Only as Good as Your Word*

About the Author
Bruce Frankel is a writer, reporter, and poet. At the age of fifty-three, he completed an MFA program at Sarah Lawrence College and began publishing in literary journals. He coauthored the bestseller *Life: World War II – History's Great Conflict in Pictures* and has held positions at *People*, *USA Today*, and Gannett Westchester Newspapers, where he was a prizewinning columnist and investigative reporter. He lives in New York City.

Introduction

I am now in the final year of my sixth decade. If I were a generation older, I would be anticipating the finish line of my working life and the greeting Happy 60th! would loom above it like an anvil waiting to drop on my surviving dreams and aspirations of youth. It was not long ago, after all, that novelist William Styron, in the grips of a depression that began on that same birthday, called sixty "that hulking milestone of mortality." Gratefully, the prospect of turning sixty has improved significantly. The age at which we imagine limitation encroaching on our abilities to perform mentally, physically, and sexually has been receding rapidly. But far too often the old beliefs cling to everyday language, attitudes, behaviors, hiring practices, and, perhaps most important, to the conversations we have with ourselves.

In recent years, neuroscientists have been providing news that is a powerful antidote to negative views of aging. In one of the most optimistic developments of our time, a scientific revolution has found that the brain is plastic and that what we do, think, and experience changes it throughout our lives. Moreover, a groundswell of research has been confirming that our brains can remain fit, like our bodies, for a quarter of a century beyond sixty and, increasingly common, longer still.

Such good news could not come at a better time.

With devastating speed, the financial crisis of 2008–2009 has destroyed hopes for early retirement entertained by many of the nation's seventy-eight million baby boomers, born between 1946 and 1964. A "once-in- a-century" economic event—as former Federal Reserve chairman Alan Greenspan called the recession—has depleted savings, devalued homes, and ravaged stock portfolios, college savings, and retirement accounts. Even if economic recovery takes place in 2010, people are likely to have to work years longer than they ever dreamed to regain lost financial ground.

This will further stoke the already growing trend of longer work lives. With average life expectancy surging beyond seventy-seven, the potential for boredom and the expense of living two or three decades of idle life were already making retirement less alluring. Even before the economic downturn, when they were feeling considerably more flush, 79 percent of boomers between fifty and fifty-nine did not intend to voluntarily retire from full-time work at the traditional age, according to a MetLife Foundation/Civic Ventures Encore

Career Survey. Rather than pursue the life of leisure their parents' generation had, they intended to find meaningful employment, at least part-time. About half of those already in second careers have chosen to remain as consultants in familiar professions, while nearly a third have chosen to enter new careers in education, health, and nonprofits.

For a decade, students of successful aging have been promising that the trend of encore careers would benefit older adults and be a boon to American society. Some— notably Marc Freedman, the cofounder of Civic Ventures, who has built on the groundbreaking work of John Gardner, the architect of Lyndon Johnson's Great Society and the founder of Executive Corps and Common Cause—have been making the case for socially connected work in the second half of life as a source of individual and societal renewal. As a result, the discussion has been shifting away from how to protect the rights of older Americans to work to how to cultivate work that enriches their lives, allows them to play vital roles in improving and strengthening their communities, and employs skills, talents, and creativity generated over a lifetime.

Considering what is being learned about the resilience of the miraculous three pounds of protoplasm we carry around in our skulls, there may be another upside to this shift. The brain does not like to be idle either, and work is one of the best ways to keep it busy. The less we demand of it and the less stimulation, novelty, and variety we provide, the more likely it is to shrink—quite literally—and stop doing the things we hope it will, like remember. The wonder is that what is required to keep the brain strong, nimble, and durable is not neurological magic so much as common sense, discipline, luck, and loving-kindness.

The full implications of these discoveries are just being explored. But they have already overturned centuries of dogma that at birth the brain is allotted its one hundred billion cells, which then die off throughout a lifetime and at an accelerating pace as we age.

The stories of the people in this book also refute that old dogma, but with an evidence not found in laboratory animals and brain scans. They offer persuasive and encouraging proof of the long-lasting human potential for physical, intellectual, and creative vitality that can be reclaimed and enlarged upon by people from their sixties to the cusp of one hundred.

This is a book of profiles of people who have succeeded after sixty. Their stories are not simply examples of successful aging, they are inspirational in the truest sense. We want to breathe the positive air they breathe, take risks and experience the energy and strength to remake ourselves as they have, be consumed by our imaginations as they are, pursue passion and purpose—at any age—as they do. They do not so much defy age as defy the limitation that our culture places on age, a culture that too often discounts, trivializes, or humors the ambitions of older adults.

Over the two years spent gathering these stories—listening to the people in this book and watching them at work—I have frequently returned home to share their accounts with family and friends. More often than not, my auditors brightened with interest, particularly if they were baby boomers. What became obvious was that they, too, were hungry for proof that there is as much possibility left in their lives as is incessantly advertised in commercials for financial services, facial products, and remedies for sexual dysfunction. Almost always, when I finished one tale or another, the listener would say something like, "I guess there's hope for me!" or "So, what should I do with the rest of my life?"

Occasionally, someone would comment, "Better late!" But the success and reward of these later-life achievers bestows more than exemption for tardiness. They have gotten the chance to savor the process of becoming something new and surprising—and recognition for what they do— in ways impossible for a

young person obsessed with the next act. Their stories are, after all, more than just proof that they have succeeded. They are profiles in courage, endurance, discipline, devotion, and creativity in the third age.

Only a couple of the subjects in this book had more than modest means when they began their later-life endeavors. None, for varying reasons, had it easy. Five of the women had spent the bulk of their lives as homemakers, and the majority of the men had modest careers they were happy to leave behind when they retired. All overcame painful personal losses or adversity, including the death of children and spouses, divorce, disease, and the wreckage of a career. They have faced the biases of age, race, and gender. And none had savored before age sixty the kind of recognition, satisfaction, and fulfillment they have since.

Goal setting, challenge, and follow-through are fundamental to feelings of well-being and success. The people in this book are ardent goal setters, whether pursuing the perfection of a paragraph or bringing renewal to a desolate urban landscape. For some, goals arose spontaneously, as in the case of stone sculptor Theodore Ludwiczak, who never carved anything before pulling a rock from the Hudson River one summer day; or Naomi Wilzig, whose passion evolved only after she received a request from a son to find him a piece of erotic art. Or there's Thomas Dwyer, who retired from a career in government intelligence and claimed dance before he had taken a single lesson. Some, like Dana Dakin who flew off to Ghana, virtually without a map, were motivated by their sixtieth birthday to create a microfinance program. Runner Margie Stoll took to the road in a record-breaking way. Getting his Ph.D. at sixty conditioned Robert Iadeluca to undertake a hospital internship at seventy. In almost all cases, circumstance and chance play an important role in the unpredictable outcomes, as with Betty Reid-Soskin, who was called back to rescue a legendary family music store on a drug-infested street and ended up becoming the nation's oldest national park ranger.

This book began one day in 2006 when I was having lunch with my friend Jim, who makes his living as a ghostwriter for celebrities.

We were treating ourselves to the $7.50 two-roll lunch special at a neighborhood sushi joint on the Upper West Side of New York City. On the verge of celebrating his sixtieth birthday, Jim had just had a book deal he was counting on blow up. He was in a morbid state of mind. He wondered out loud about his chances of ever achieving anything approaching the success he once imagined for himself. "How exactly did this happen to me?" he asked.

Four years younger than Jim, I was beginning to wonder the same thing about myself. It was a darkly comic lunch. It ended only after the waitress had graciously poured the fourth glass of water. On my walk home, I began brainstorming book ideas. As soon as I reached my apartment, I phoned Jim and, somewhat whimsically, suggested that we work our way out of our mutual funk by collaborating on a book about people who never had much success before but, surprisingly, achieved significantly after turning sixty. I was aware of other books on late bloomers that profiled famous late achievers, such as Harry Truman, Winston Churchill, Mother Teresa, Paul Cézanne, Eubie Blake, Isak Dinesen, Harland Sanders—otherwise known as Colonel Sanders—and Julia Child. But I was interested in people who were alive and whose accomplishments before sixty were considerably more average—more, that is, like Jim's or mine.

While he was considering joining me on the project, Jim got a celebrity book deal and went on, it should be noted, to write a bestseller.

At about the same time, my then eighty- four-year- old mother was making a slow recovery from a quadruple bypass. For months she had been tied to a wound pump and was stuck in her apartment in Coral Springs, Florida. She had always been an attractive, energetic, and resourceful woman with a good sense of humor and wide interests. In addition to raising two sons, she had held a variety of jobs—naval draftsman, publicist for actor Canada Lee in the 1940s, a cosmetics counter manager at Bloomingdale's, and a country club

bookkeeper. At sixty-seven she became a certified paralegal, but ended up spending the last fifteen years of her life in business as an accounts manager for a gold wholesaler in Florida. Much to her unhappiness, she was laid off at eighty-two. Now, uncharacteristically, she seemed to have given up. “What can I do about it?” was her prevailing attitude. “Whatever will be, will be.”

For my mother’s sake and, without admitting it, for mine, I began reading about the recent discoveries of the maturing brain. Everywhere I turned in the popular literature, there was reason for excitement. As my appetite for the newly optimistic views grew, so did my desire to see the proof of these neurological principles in life, in action. So began my quest to find the remarkable, not-so-average anymore people who are the subjects of *What Should I Do with the Rest of My Life?*

As my mother recovered, she and I kept up near-nightly phone conversations. To motivate her, I plied her with the stories of the late bloomers I was discovering. And I implored her to return to her early passion of painting. One day, she called with news. She had signed up for an art class at a local public school. Initially, there was just the satisfaction of an amateur attempting to paint autumn scenes and girls holding cats. Then she began copying Caravaggio and reading art history and studying the Great Masters. No matter what she was working on at school, each Monday night she returned home and said, “It was okay. I learned something new.”

One night, more than a year after she had returned to painting class, a man who had seen her carrying her paintings home from class the previous week stopped her on her way from her car to the entrance to her building. He wanted to know if she would consider painting a portrait of him and his two sons—for a fee—so that he could give it as a Christmas present. She hesitated. She told him she would get back to him. That night, she laughed at the idea. “What would I charge him?”

Two weeks before her eighty-fifth birthday, she accepted her first commission. Since, there have been others, to paint portraits and wildlife, and she has returned to the gym three days a week. And as I slowly pushed forward with my writing, she would say, “At the rate I’m going, you’re going to have to include a chapter on me in your book.”

One of the first preliminary interviews I conducted was with Virginia Marsh Bell, of Lexington, Kentucky. After raising five children, she returned to school in her fifties because she believed she had nothing of value to put on a résumé other than a thirty-seven-year- old college diploma and a wallet full of children’s photographs. “And I knew I couldn’t sit home one more year and watch Monday Night Football,” she said. She took a typing class. That gave her the courage to take a graduate course in social work at the University of Kentucky. At sixty, she received her MSW and began counseling families at the university’s Sanders-Brown Center on Aging. On request, she developed a program to give respite to caregivers. Then she established one of the first dementia-specific day centers in the United States. And, at age seventy-four, she wrote the first of several books on her “Best Friends” approach to caregiving to people with Alzheimer’s and dementia. She also began receiving invitations to deliver her message around the globe. Several states, including all of Maine, and a number of foreign countries, including all of Canada and Hungary, officially adopted her approach.

When we first spoke Virginia was eighty-five. She had recently returned from speaking in Beirut, Lebanon, was continuing to take high-impact aerobics at 6 a.m. each morning, and had begun to study string theory in math. Why string theory? I asked. “Because you’ve got to make the brain sweat,” she said.

Her phrase became my mantra, and I had hoped to include her story in this book. But in 2008, when I was ready to head to Kentucky to spend time with her, Virginia had to beg off. She had been diagnosed with non-Hodgkin’s lymphoma, and, understandably, she wanted to conserve her energy to fight the disease and

continue doing her work. As I began to write this introduction, I was seized by the need to check in with Virginia and see how she was doing. When she came to the phone the relief I felt was soon surpassed by my astonishment. Not only had she successfully survived treatment and was in full remission, at eighty-six she had run the Lexington Bluegrass 10K race. “My goal was to run the six-point-two miles at a pace of at least fourteen minutes a mile. I did. I beat everyone, except one woman, from seventy up.” Of course, she was still going to her high-impact aerobics class each morning and continuing to study string theory. “There is such awe and mystery in the universe,” she said. “I don’t mind getting old. I enjoy life to the fullest. What I hate most of all is the idea of missing the rest of this century.”

No neuroscientist, gerontologist, or social scientist, I plunged into writing this book without any theories to prove, data to collect, or ax to grind. I found my subjects by scouring the Internet, from recommendations from nonprofits and government organizations, and by word of mouth. I was looking for people who had “succeeded significantly in some way,” I would say. Sometimes, my inquiries met with resistance, as if I might only mean financial wealth or celebrity. Some feared it was a mistake to define success narrowly or too traditionally. Ultimately, I knew I would know what I wanted when I saw it, but I knew it would have to include some way in which a goal had been reached and had received some kind of public recognition. What I came to see in the people whom I chose was how well they fit into Henry David Thoreau’s belief about how success happens: “I have learned that if one advances confidently in the direction of his dreams, and endeavors to live the life he has imagined, he will meet with a success unexpected in common hours.”

Usually, it was not solely the accomplishment that attracted me to a subject, it was the whole skein of events and accidents that had brought success unexpectedly in common hours. And those tales filled me with curiosity about the worlds and families into which my subjects were born, the ways they shook off failure and overcame grief, and where they found the courage to take risks and persevere in later years in spite of the collective chorus of doubt.

As unique as each is, as a group the individuals in *What Should I Do with the Rest of My Life?* have done what the scientists tell us we should do: they maintain healthy diets, exercise regularly, challenge themselves, fill their lives with novel experiences and varied social connections. They are, for the most part, thin. They like to dance and to exercise. They tend to be more spiritual than religious. Even those who are of a more solitary nature interact and communicate daily with extensive networks of people. And despite occasional complaints about minor forgetfulness, they have exquisite memories. Listening closely to their own desires, and not to prescriptions for aging well, they have followed their own curiosity on paths of learning and discovery. And in doing so, they have fed their passions and given themselves permission to achieve success.

Many of them possess ample wisdom, a virtue long attributed to aging. Remarkably, brain studies may be providing some insight into that, too. Neuropsychologist Elkhonon Goldberg says wisdom may be the result of cognitive processes that occur in the brain as we age. In The Wisdom Paradox, he notes that pattern recognition is the primary means by which we learn. As we age, we accumulate templates for pattern recognition, and they, in turn, allow for relatively quick and effortless decision- making. The decision-making appears intuitive, but it is actually the result of pre-analysis, compressed and crystallized. “Aging,” Goldberg writes, “is the price we must pay for accumulating wisdom patterns.”

It is also striking that the many subjects in this book who suffered profound pain and loss were willing and able to revisit their traumas, even when it meant returning to moments most of us hope never to see. Remarkably—and instructively—they do not remain rooted in rumination or regret. They live their lives forward, actively attending to the present and moving optimistically toward what they hope to create. Many were motivated by generativity, the act of producing out of concern for future generations. But even more often they expressed their interest in helping to improve lives today.

From the hot summer morning when I first sat in a booth with Loretta Thayer in the Silver Leaf Diner in upstate Canton, New York, to the moment Betty Reid Soskin, driving her sporty red BMW, dropped me off at the Oakland International Airport, I have experienced my own awakening about aging. Each of the elders in this book has challenged my thinking, not simply with the fact of their age, but with the quality and intelligence of their pursuits and the integrity of their characters. My conversations with them have altered my own time line. They have convinced me that past failing can as easily prove preparatory as predictive. Age does not of itself limit or enable us. The choice is ours.

Users Review

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Ida Vanwormer:

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