

# YOUR SECOND TO LAST CHAPTER



Creating a Meaningful Life on Your Own Terms

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## THE CHAPTERS OF OUR LIVES



*A loyal and hard-working servant to the king was walking outside the palace walls and fell into a ravine. And there encountered a genie. The servant could have one wish and it would be granted without question. Anything. He thought for a moment, then said, "I have worked hard all my life, serving others. Now I wish to be served. I wish for everyone to obey my commands. And to do no more work."*

*"Your wish is granted," said the genie, and disappeared.*

*When the servant returned to the castle he was stunned to find his every wish immediately granted. For the first month, it was a paradise he had never known. In the second month, he grew restless, and after the third, he hurried to the ravine where the genie awaited him.*

*"Whatever I wanted was given to me. I needed do nothing at all. I served no one. I was served from the moment I arose to the moment I went to bed. In the beginning, I enjoyed my new life. But now I am in agony. My life had no meaning. You must take this wish back."*

*The genie turned to leave. "I cannot. I granted you one wish, and one wish only."*

*"But this is like living in hell!" the servant pleaded.*

*"Where do you think you have been for these ninety days?"*

## A Time Like No Other

**W**e Americans find ourselves, for perhaps the first time in human history, in an economy when a significant number of women and men of average means — not only the wealthy — will live many years without having to work for a living. They will be without major responsibilities, without significant concern about material needs.

It was not always so, as those of us in what are euphemistically called the “retirement years” well know. In our parents’ generation, a man or woman worked until age 65 or so, lived on Social Security and perhaps some small savings after that, hoped for a few years of reasonable health (men fewer years than women), and then departed this life.

With modern medicine and financial pension benefits that can range from the reasonably comfortable to the very comfortable, Americans today are the first generation to have twenty or even thirty years of what could be termed “productive life” remaining. It is an uncharted and unwritten chapter and many of us are unsure what voyage lies ahead, what its pages might someday read.

It is this chapter, what I am calling “The Second to Last Chapter,” that I want to explore with you in this little book. So what are the “chapters” of our lives, overlapping as they might be?

### **First: At Home and Developing**

At first completely dependent, we gradually develop independence and the ability to function outside the protective environment of the home. We form an idea of the world around us from a limited group of people, mainly our parents. We may be somewhat naïve, but we are idealistic, we dream great dreams, envisioning heroic paths for our life. No one understands us, and certainly not the secret yearnings of our souls.

### **Second: At School and Learning**

The number of years vary, but we receive a formal education. We are partially or entirely free of parental influence. Other ideas and values are presented and we sift through and evaluate both those and our own as we are formed into a more independent individual. We question more, we sometimes fall into cynicism, seeing the foibles of human nature. We rebrand our youthful cynicism and call it discernment or intellectualizing. We take all this conflicting information and storms of our mind into our mature life. Our idealism is more interior as we become more aware of the sacrifices idealism requires, but it is still there, deep in our souls, in what we know to be the best part of who we are.

### **Third: Launching Career(s) and Striving**

Our dependence and education are over and we must support ourselves. We may follow a well-charted path (practicing medicine would be good example), or we cast about for work we hope will be satisfying and provide us with what we desire materially. Many of us will have multiple or serial careers where we devote a large por-

tion of our time and energy. Our work may excite and energize; at times it appears as a no more than a means to an end. We continue to seek work that challenges us and uses our particular skills. The word “practical” has new meaning.

#### **Fourth: Relationships, Marriage, and Raising Children**

We find a mate, and, like a career, there may be more than one. We may or may not marry. We may or may not have children. We now must apportion time between career — in which we are now more experienced — and family or relationship responsibilities, whatever those might be. These are our most productive years; our energy is abundant, our hopes are continually high for interpersonal happiness and fulfilling work.

#### **Fifth: Children Leave; Career Levels Off and Ends**

Usually within the decade that our children leave home permanently and we are in our fifties to sixties, we find ourselves at the end of the career or careers we have pursued. We may be pleased or disappointed in what we have achieved. But there are fewer demands made of us; our material needs are likewise less and, within reason, met. We look ahead. What will it be, a life of relaxation, rest from our labors? Doing those things we never had time for? Could there be something else, as we realize that we could live many more years that do not have the demands and structure of our life up to now?

## **Sixth: The Second to Last Chapter**

We have time and maybe the resources to explore doing something we might have always wanted to do but never had the time or opportunity to try. This is the chapter this book will explore, “The Second to Last Chapter.” It is the one that is least explored, partly because it is relatively new in human history — especially for men, many of whom used to go directly from their work lives to their “last” chapter. I call the people in this group the “SLCs.”

## **Seventh: The Last Chapter**

We age and, depending on our health, need assistance or are able to live independently. We do not have the energy we once had, but may still be in reasonably good health. Our activities lessen, our world becomes smaller, but these are not necessarily unpleasant years; there is a mellowness about them. We find ourselves looking back over our life. Did it turn out as I had hoped? Is there anything I would have changed? Did I become the person I knew, in my soul, I was meant to be?

## **Our Life, Simplified?**

Of course, few lives fall into neat categories or chapters, but roughly, those seven chapters encapsulate what many of us will experience. A child with severe and ongoing medical problems, the need to care for grandchildren or aging parents, our own physical or mental health, career setbacks, troubled relationships — all or any may demand everything of us.

But, for many of us as we arrive at The Second to Last Chapter, we experience a time in our lives when we are more aware of

our abilities, more in command of our resources and — most importantly — our time, than ever before. And we are free to...do what...be what?

That is why I felt I needed to write a whole book about it.

It is not that we haven't looked ahead to these years. We have considered the options and have seen people our age as they embark upon this life chapter. Some possibilities:

- ✦ Being the ideal, on-call grandparent may be the “career” some have been yearning for. You know, little children to care for, to love, have fun with, yet being able to return them to their parents and go on with your own life.
- ✦ It might be travel for which you never had the time or money, that hobby you always wanted to invest in full time, finally being able to put in a few hours of volunteering each week, or simply stepping back from full-time involvement in a business or profession that once took all your energies.
- ✦ For some, it is the idealized life, relaxing and “Doing whatever I want whenever I want — or don't want — to do it,”

But I will never forget that sobering day, when I was in my early sixties and approaching my own Second to Last Chapter. I was driving on a street that skirted the edge of the local country club golf course. And there he was, a man about my age, perhaps a bit younger. He was dressed in a bright lime-green sweater and his slacks and shoes bespoke a man who only wore the best. He was coming off a green at midday and walking toward the next tee. I saw his sad face for a moment — a flash really, like a single movie frame — and I surely could have been wrong. My instincts as a reporter for over forty years are not always accurate.

But I saw a spectral face, that of a hollowed-out man. Maybe he had just missed a putt. Or maybe – because I too was afraid to face what I would do in the years ahead – I saw him as a sort of modern day version of Scrooge’s Ghost of Christmas Yet to Come. If you recall “A Christmas Carol,” that ghost said nothing and Dickens wrote that, in turn, nothing of note would be said of Scrooge at his funeral. Such would be Scrooge’s fate, as a life closed, one of revering ledgers and allowing dreams to go unfulfilled and love to be unrequited.

### The Alternative?

Think back to when you first had the feeling sweep over you that nothing was impossible, the future was bursting with possibilities. Or that heart-stopping instant when you realized you couldn’t live without the person in front of you and that person said the feeling was mutual. Or when you found a work that you wanted to give everything to. That moment of spiritual transcendence, when the connection between you and the Divine Reality was so profound you knew that all the promises were true: your mustard seed could produce a great tree, you could move a mountain. Nothing was impossible, The Force was indeed with you.

To be fully alive, with the excitement of a new, open-ended adventure: That is what The Second to Last Chapter offers us, in ways few of us ever imagined. I did not, and I will tell you about that in detail later in this book. But for now I will say it quite simply: I have come to understand that *The Second to Last Chapter — and the freedom and abilities we now possess — has the potential to provide for us the most exciting and fulfilling years yet. I am talking about deep spiritual fulfillment, a true giving of ourselves to something that really matters, something that will not be done unless we do it.*

## Remembering

When we were young, we might have thought about going off to the Peace Corps or becoming a medical or religious missionary to suffering people. We might have dreamed about going into politics or becoming a famous activist for a cause. Whatever our gallant dream, we envisioned how much good we could do...if only...if only. If only given the chance. If only we didn't have to complete school or support a family. If only our kids weren't so young. If only we had the money, the time, the skills, the opportunity.



I remember reading *National Geographic* when I was a teenager and seeing people living in desperate poverty. I don't know where it came from but the thought kept coming back: Someday I want to — I have to — help those people.

Dale Smith, retired business executive



On a parallel track, we look back now on our lives then: What truly mattered? What satisfied us, made us the happiest, the most fulfilled? The job promotion? The bigger house or newer car? I think not. Our lives — we — are so much deeper and profound than that. We found our true identity, our soul, when we were

asked and we gave the most of ourselves.

Let me put this another way. When we realize that our spiritual core — our soul — is the most accurate gauge of who we are and what truly and deeply satisfies us, we can no longer relate to ourselves as merely a compilation of personal needs and worldly goals. These are woefully inadequate; our soul yearns for so much more.

I believe that in The Second to Last Chapter of our lives — perhaps even more so than when we were younger — we are no longer are creatures merely seeking pleasures, even merely seeking peace. Ah, peace — that oft-sought-after goal that never is awarded to those who think it can be obtained by sheer will and not abandonment. In these years of our lives, something happens. In the most cosmic sense, we regress to an earlier, simpler self. We become innocent, childlike in a way. The layers of sophistication and reasoning not so much melt away as become compartmentalized to allow us to open up to a new kind of lucidity.

Meaning. Purpose. Those two words swirl around in our brains. We want — our soul urges us — to live for something that matters.

## The Hunger for Meaning

If I might try to put into words what went through my own mind as I entered The Second to Last Chapter of my life: “I have only so many more years to live on this planet. During at least some of those years, however many they may be, I want to give myself to something that truly matters. My basic needs are taken care of. In fact, I *don't need* anything. What I *do need* is something that will give the rest of my life my life meaning.”

In my late fifties and early sixties, as I found myself reviewing my life, I saw that at so many points it had been brimming with

meaning. My struggle to get an education, my military service, finding a mate, raising a family, succeeding (a continual struggle) as a writer. All had mattered enormously to me and all had called upon everything I had. But as I looked ahead, the excitement of a fresh challenge that would ask me one more time for my best effort...well, I didn't see it. What would make me want to bound out of bed in the morning? What would trouble my dreams at night? I had always had a goal, something that possessed me. Now I needed something new.

It was not that I was neurotic (no more than usual) or nail-bitingly anxious about it. I could do a little writing and gardening in the years ahead, take some nice vacations with my wife, spend time with my two grown sons. But I somehow knew that would not be enough for me. That man walking off the green at the country club kept reappearing in my mind.

I knew I would never be one of those extraordinary individuals with unlimited funds, energy, and skills who, by sheer wealth or influence, could do whatever he or she wanted to do. Bill Gates, with his good heart and billions of dollars can and will virtually eradicate polio throughout the world. Most of us do not have that capacity. But I wanted to do *something* with meaning, *something* beyond my everyday life. I asked myself a few questions:

- ✦ Was there something yearning within me to do something that truly matters?
- ✦ Was I willing to make sacrifices to accomplish that "thing"?
- ✦ Was I able to reach beyond what I thought were my limits, especially at my age?
- ✦ Did I want to help make the world...or, more realistically, a tiny portion of it...a little better place?

Bring your answers to those questions...or your own questions...along, and let's continue an exploration of *Your Second* to Last Chapter.



There is only one thing that is truly insufferable, and that is a life without meaning. There is nothing wrong with the search for happiness. But there is something great — meaning — which transfigures all. When you have meaning you are content, you belong.

Sir Laurens van der Post, *Hasten Slowly*





As transitions take place...a fundamental and primal shift from ambition to meaning occurs. The shift often takes the form of abrupt, unexpected changes in our lives.... With this shift comes an initial restlessness, irritability, anxiety or discontent with our current situation, and a deep questioning of the motivation surrounding our choices in career and relationships. Everything comes up for review. Previous desires and choices to attain status, power, money, fame, or strategic relationships lose meaning and become unsatisfying.

Angles Arrien, *The Second Half of Life*

