



Moving Beyond Fulfillment: Wisdom Years Stories of Passion, Perseverance, and Productivity

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Abstract

Seven participants were interviewed to uncover how they remain so productive in their wisdom years, those typically marked by retirement. Participants included a leading educational psychologist, a renowned national television news anchor, a four-time national champion collegiate coach, the founder and former chief executive of Arbor Day Foundation, a university scholar turned playwright, and two female adventurers who quit their jobs, sold their possessions, and have lived a nomadic life, hiking thousands of miles throughout America. Their wisdom years stories describe how and why they shun retirement and remain productive. The article concludes with seven advice-laden conclusions for readers: (a) Do not retire, but if you do, retire to something, (b) follow your bliss, (c) work hard, (d) offset aging challenges, (e) be inspired by role models, (f) be a life-long learner, and (g) take heed of the universe conspiring.

Keywords Talent development · Productivity · Wisdom years · Aging · Learning · Retirement

Psychologist Erik Erikson (1964) posited eight stages of psychosocial development, with each stage offering a conflict and potential resolutions. Erikson labeled the final stage as the wisdom years, and its conflict was integrity versus despair. During this stage, which generally occurs between age 65 and death, one reflects on their life and determines if the outcome is regret, bitterness, and despair or fulfillment and wisdom. Erikson defined wisdom as an “informed and detached concern with life itself even in the face of death itself (p. 133).” Although Erikson might have been prudent in making wisdom seeking the final stage, he was shortsighted in postulating that its accumulation was complete in one’s sixties.

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Rosenow's Wisdom Years Contributions

Turn the clock ahead 50 years and we get a different wisdom years perspective from John Rosenow who was the founder of the Arbor Day Foundation at age 21 and served as its chief executive until age 65. In that capacity, Rosenow helped grow the organization to a million members, was instrumental in the planting of more than 250 million trees, brought the practice of urban forestry to hundreds of American cities, aided in replanting dozens of national and state forests, helped save threatened rain forests in Latin America, and educated children to the wonders of nature. As Rosenow moved toward his wisdom years, he wanted them to be his happiest and most productive yet. Toward that end, Rosenow read the biographies of those who made important wisdom years contributions in areas related to Rosenow's priorities: improving the environment, supporting people's personal and spiritual growth, and creating a well-functioning society. Rosenow believed that if he could understand how those before him made their final life chapters complete and productive, he might do the same.

Rosenow's biographical research culminated in the 2014 book *Living Long & Living Well: Inspiring Stories of Creating and Contributing During the Wisdom Years*. In those stories, Rosenow did not find detached reflection of the past and resignation to a life lived as Erikson postulated. Instead, Rosenow found fierce continuation, even acceleration of one's wisdom journey toward a larger, more complete, creative, noble, and satisfying life.

One of Rosenow's (2014) 10 subjects was Carl Jung, who believed that people grow toward their full potential over their entire lives and who was an exemplar of his own theory. Jung was productive until age 86. He published his most influential books during his wisdom years while continuing to explore psychotherapy and to investigate new topics related to mythology, alchemy, synchronicity, religion, and even flying saucers.

Another exemplar (Rosenow, 2014) was dancer and choreographer Martha Graham who shaped modern dance well into her wisdom years. In her sixties, Graham performed the role of the "young bride" in Aaron Copland's "Appalachian Spring." Between ages 65–75, Graham created 10 new dance roles for herself. In her eighties, Graham taught dance classes almost daily. At 96, Graham went on a 55-day tour with her company to the Far East and choreographed her last work, "Maple Leaf Rag."

Some other Rosenow (2014) subjects included Nelson Mandela, who was elected president of South Africa at age 72 and who negotiated the end of apartheid after spending 27 years in jail as a political prisoner; Joseph Campbell, who retired from his university position to spend more time on his academic writings on mythology; and Margaret Mead, who popularized the study of anthropology through her writings and public appearances and who in her seventies became president of the American Association for the Advancement of Science. Mead used her life-long popularity and wisdom years platform to advocate for the use of science to solve the world's urgent problems.

The Call for Qualitative Story Telling

Rosenow's book (Rosenow, 2014) was a historical, retrospective, collective-case-study account of wisdom years success, but it is among a scant literature on how people approach their wisdom years and what they accomplish during them. In an essay titled "Understanding Retirement Requires Getting Inside People's Stories: A Call For More Qualitative Research," Amabile (2019) argues that quantitative research, which uses surveys and archival data and dominates the empirical literature (more than 90% is quantitative), has contributed much to our understanding of retirement transitions and consequences, but that only rigorous qualitative studies, using open-ended questions, can truly illuminate wisdom years' determinants and outcomes at the individual level.

Answering the call, Steiner and Amabile (2022) conducted a wide-sweeping qualitative study on how American professionals construe the transition from their working lives to retirement lives. It included 215 interviews with 120 participants, including 12 interviewed longitudinally throughout their years-long retirement transition. The study provided rich interview data about how workers' life cognitions (e.g., (a) perceiving retirement as a continuation of pursuing meaningful work, (b) "putting a bow" on meaningful work to pursue a new form of meaning, (c) slowing down the daily pace to recuperate in retirement, and (d) retirement as a time to reap the rewards of work) shaped their work and retirement construals. What the study did not explore, though, is the magnitude and richness of what is possible for those who shun conventional retirement and continue to produce meaningful work in their wisdom years, either inside or outside their career fields. It is that exploration that can show us what is possible during the wisdom years and how it is accomplished.

The Present Study

The present study explores just that. It is a phenomenological, collective case study that examines and tells six evolving modern-day stories of people maintaining wisdom years passion, perseverance, and productivity. Much as Rosenow chose historical participants based on personal interests and values, we did the same with our purposeful modern-day selections. Here are our participants (their ages when interviewed in 2022) and why they were chosen:

1. Richard Mayer (75) is recognized as the most productive educational psychologist on the planet. Our educational psychology backgrounds made Mayer a logical choice.
2. Nancy Shank (56) was an administrator and researcher at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln before quitting that job to become a full-time writer. In 2022, her inaugural play debuted. A drastic and successful career change seemed like a story worth pursuing.

3. John Cook (66) is the head volleyball coach at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. In his 22 seasons, Cook's Husker teams have earned the nation's best winning percentage, have claimed four national championships, and have amassed the nation's highest attendance. As University of Nebraska personnel and Husker fans, we have followed and celebrated Cook's success.
4. Judy Woodruff (75) is the renowned news anchor for *PBS NewsHour* and has been a Washington D.C.-based journalist since 1977 covering the White House, politics, and the news. Second author Jessica Walsh worked as a journalist and is a longtime Woodruff fan.
5. John Rosenow (72) is one of the most influential nature advocates in the past century and is the author of *Living Long & Living Well*, a book that influenced and guided our study.
6. The Wander Women: Kristy Burns (58) and Annette Demel (65) are two of the three Wander Women who quit their jobs, sold their homes, and set off to explore and enjoy nature. Their adventures the past 7 years have taken them along thousands of miles of hiking trails including "The Triple Crown" of hiking: Pacific Crest Trail (2653 miles), Continental Divide Trail (3028 miles), and Appalachian Trail (2190 miles). We are hiking and nature enthusiasts who have followed their inspiring adventures via their frequent video internet posts.

The present study was also guided by first-author Kiewra's long-standing interest and reliance on talent research to guide life decisions. When his first child became interested in chess, Kiewra searched for parenting advice on how to foster talent. Finding little on the subject, Kiewra conducted qualitative interviews with parents of talented children to understand their roles (Kiewra, 2019). When Kiewra pondered how he could become a more productive scholar, he again found little on the topic and began a series of qualitative studies interviewing many of the world's most productive educational psychologists (Flanigan et al., 2018; Kiewra & Creswell, 2000; Kiewra et al., 2021; Patterson-Hazley & Kiewra, 2013; Prinz et al., 2020). Now as he contemplates his impending wisdom years, Kiewra seeks to unearth the experiences and guidance of those now writing their wisdom years stories. The present study reveals those stories. We hope they might interest, influence, and inspire others pondering their own wisdom years journeys.

Method

Participants

Participants were the seven people identified in the introduction. The sample ranged in age from 56 to 75, with two in their fifties (Burns and Shank), two in their sixties (Cook and Demel), and three in their seventies (Mayer, Rosenow, and Woodruff). Four participants were women (Burns, Demel, Shank, and Woodruff), and three were men (Cook, Mayer, and Rosenow). Some remained in their original profession: collegiate volleyball coach (Cook), educational psychologist (Mayer), and journalist (Woodruff), whereas others changed direction in their wisdom years: Arbor Day

Foundation CEO to development director for Dimensions Educational Research Foundation and their Nature Explore program (Rosenow), university administrator and researcher to playwright and budding novelist (Shank), mental health counselor to adventurer (Burns), and educator and high school librarian to adventurer (Demel).

Ethical approval was granted by the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board. All interview participants provided informed consent to all participation aspects, including the publication of interview content by name.

Data Collection

Participants were invited via email to participate in the study, and all agreed. Background information, such as age, work history, and accomplishments, was collected about each participant from CVs and biographies they sent us upon request and through an internet search. Interviews were scheduled with each participant individually, with the exception of Wander Women Burns and Demel who were interviewed together and therefore handled as a single case. Three of the interviews were conducted in person (Cook, Rosenow, and Shank). The others were conducted via Zoom (Mayer, Wander Women, and Woodruff). All interviews were conducted by one or more of the authors, with the first author involved in all of them. Interviews lasted approximately 90 min, were video recorded, and transcribed using VidGrid professional transcription in preparation for data coding and interpretation.

Interviews were guided by a series of questions prepared by the research team. Questions were similar for each participant but varied some based on unique aspects of participants' backgrounds. In general, questions pertained to (a) motivation (e.g., What is your motivation for creating in your wisdom years? How do your goals and motivation now compare to your goals and motivation previously?), (b) time (e.g., How much time do you spend creating in your wisdom years compared to previously? What do you do throughout a typical day?), (c) productivity (e.g., How productive are you now compared to previously? What factors, such as people, places, or things aid or hinder productivity?), (d) aging (e.g., How has aging affected your work for better or worse? Do you have any fears regarding aging and your work?), (e) health (e.g., Are there any health factors or concerns limiting your work? What do you do to maintain physical and mental health?), (g) early experiences (e.g., What childhood experiences might be linked to your wisdom years choices and work?), (h) the future (e.g., What lies ahead for you in your wisdom years?), and (i) advice (e.g., What advice do you have for someone considering retirement? What advice do you have for remaining productive in the wisdom years? If you could talk to your younger self, what advice would you dispense?). Participants received written interview questions about 1 week before their interviews, giving them ample time to contemplate questions and formulate responses.

Data Analysis

Interview transcripts were analyzed in three steps designed to align the data analysis process with the phenomenological approach and aims of the study (Smith &

Osborn, 2003). First, an exploratory analysis was conducted for each interview transcript to identify primary factors associated with wisdom years success (Brinkmann & Kvale, 2014). Each author coded two interview transcripts independently. The coders read their assigned transcripts and created codes for statements relevant to participants' wisdom years success. Next, the coders examined all codes and categorized related codes into larger themes for each of their assigned transcripts. Finally, the coders assessed the themes, regrouped connected themes (e.g., a theme might be a subtheme of another), and determined the final themes (i.e., primary factors) for each participant. For each interview transcript, the responsible author created a summary of themes, subthemes, and codes for the other authors' review and cross-check. After all authors reviewed the themes, they discussed and resolved disagreements. Finally, a member checking procedure was conducted (Creswell & Poth, 2018) by giving the seven participants the opportunity to read the manuscript, make corrections, offer suggestions, and validate findings.

Results

Richard Mayer: You Cannot Pay Him to Retire

Richard Mayer: He is the Tom Brady of educational psychology, the G.O.A.T., greatest of all time. In addition to accumulating a bookshelf of prominent awards, Mayer has the stats to justify his G.O.A.T. status. Mayer was ranked Number 1 as the most productive educational psychologist in the world by the *Contemporary Educational Psychology*, ranked Number 1 as the most cited educational psychologist by Google Scholar, and ranked in the upper 0.01% of scientists in the world based on total citations by *PLoS Biology*. And why not? Mayer is the author of more than 600 publications, including 40 books. Moreover, at age 75, Mayer is not slowing down, increasing his 10-year publication rate over the past 30 years from 95 to 150 to 160. In 2021 alone, Mayer had 26 publications. He had 18 in the first 4 months of 2022 when interviewed. Seven years ago, at age 68, Mayer could have retired at full pay and benefits from his psychology professorship at the University of California, Santa Barbara, but shunned retirement, essentially choosing to work there for free.

The Motivation to Keep Working

Although Mayer has received many extrinsic rewards throughout his career, such as his awards, lofty rankings, and publication record, his motivation to continue working is purely intrinsic. Mayer said, "I enjoy what I'm doing. My work makes me happy, and I'll keep doing it as long as I can." More specifically, Mayer's curiosity sustains him. He said, "The thing that really keeps me going is my curiosity to pursue burning questions I really want to answer and to potentially discover something new and worthwhile." Mayer also keeps working because the alternative is unappealing. Mayer said:

I have no interest in retiring so long as my health remains good. I simply don't like the idea of retirement. I just don't understand it, and it rubs me the wrong way. My entire life I have tried to work hard and be productive, so then to suddenly say 'I'm going to stop producing now' just doesn't seem right.

Youth Precursors

Mayer credits his Midwest upbringing for his work ethic and productivity. He said:

I came from a stable home with loving parents who were supportive and valued learning. That gave me a sense of autonomy and adventure and the confidence that I could learn and handle anything. As a kid, I pursued all sorts of things, especially science stuff. I had a little science lab in the house, and my backyard was my natural laboratory. My father was an industrial psychologist, and I helped him score tests. I saw how patterns of scores predicted job performance and that experience got me thinking about a career in psychology. I eventually set off to college to study some branch of psychology. By chance, my first course was in Thinking and Problem Solving and that set me on my lifelong path trying to figure out how to teach people to be good problem solvers.

Remaining Productive in the Wisdom Years

Mayer named four factors that help him sustain productivity in his wisdom years. The first is collaboration with students and colleagues. Mayer typically works with three or four doctoral advisees a year along with occasional undergraduate students completing honors theses, guiding each on their independent research projects. Mayer quipped, "I have wonderful students to work with who, of course, do all the work. We all know this is the secret to success in academia. They really are hardworking and inventive and a joy to be around." Mayer also credits his collaborators from around the world who help him "investigate important issues of educational psychology" and often visit him in sunny Santa Barbara perched on the Pacific Ocean. Mayer's recent publication record confirms his collaborative style. Among Mayer's 46 most recent journal and chapter publications, only 10 were sole authored. The collaborative works included nearly 50 different coauthors.

Effective time management strategies also boost Mayer's late season productivity. Mayer said, "It's really important that I segregate the day and week into specific time slots for accomplishing specific things, otherwise the day degenerates into a lot of junkie things that really go nowhere, such as answering email." Mayer preserves and allocates each morning for writing tasks. He said, "That's my most important work and that's when I'm most alert to complete it. If I can meet my daily goal of writing two or three pages in those morning hours, I'm super happy." Mayer schedules his classes and pushes his less demanding tasks like meetings and correspondence to the afternoon. He also preserves evenings and weekends for family time and relaxation, stressing that "family comes first" and that he "needs breaks to keep

strong.” Mayer does occasionally steal a bit of off-time to review manuscripts for several journals, admitting that doing so is “kind of fun and doesn’t feel like work.”

A third factor aiding productivity is autonomy. Being a senior faculty member, Mayer has leeway in choosing how he spends his time and doing what he wants to do, which is primarily focusing on research. Mayer said, “Senior faculty have less to worry about and less stress than graduate students and junior faculty who are vulnerable and under pressure all the time. Senior faculty like me have fewer constraints and are free to pursue our interests.” Adding to that autonomy, Mayer has faculty status in both psychology and education, leaving colleagues a bit uncertain about what he does. Mayer jokes that colleagues just figure he is working in his other area and tend to “leave him alone.”

The last productivity aid is Mayer’s growth mindset in the face of rejection. Mayer said:

I have probably had more papers rejected from *Journal of Educational Psychology* than anyone in the history of the journal. I get a lot of papers rejected, get a lot of grant proposals rejected. In this field, you have to learn how to take criticism and rejection because we’re pretty critical of each other and reviewers can sometimes be brutal.

Mayer believes that thick skin, an open mind, a belief in one’s self, and persistence are keys to eventual success. Mayer said:

Although rejection hurts, I try not to take it personally. Reviewers have valid comments that can help, so I try to apply their input and move on, because the important thing is continuing to pursue my research questions and to disseminate the findings. I continue to believe in my acquired abilities and tell myself to keep trying.

Effects of Aging

Mayer recognizes the effects of aging. He said:

The aging literature tells us that just about everything is moving in the wrong direction as you age. Things slow down. Reaction times slow, senses become dulled, and cognition diminishes. These are not great things. Our bodies catch up with us. We weren’t really designed to live this long.

Mayer quipped, “I used to spend time going to our kids’ soccer and baseball games. Now I go to doctor appointments.”

Speaking of doctor appointments, Mayer recently experienced a serious illness that kept him on the sidelines for months. He developed a mysterious condition where his skin became hypersensitive to contact, producing a burning sensation even while sitting on a couch or lying in bed. In typical Mayer fashion, he devoted all his energy to trying to figure out how to deal with the condition. Mayer said, “I tried to educate myself and tried to experiment to figure things out empirically. In medicine, everyone is a specialist, and nobody sees the big picture, so I was the case manager of sorts trying to figure it out.” The experience, he noted, was a wake-up call to life’s vulnerabilities and its precious opportunities.

Regulating Aging

Decades of experience provide the wisdom Mayer needs to help offset aging. Mayer said, “I can draw on my accumulated experiences conducting research, on my knowledge of the literature, and on my skills such as writing.” Mayer contends that those things do not deteriorate but actually improve with experience and practice.

Mayer also credits health maintenance for slowing the aging process. In terms of exercise, Mayer admits that he is not an “exercise maniac” but stays fit with slow daily walks, often with his dog, mountain biking, and never taking the elevator to his office. He eats healthy foods and tries to bank a full 8 h sleep each night, turning in around 11:00 p.m. and rising at 7:00 a.m. Mayer said:

As I get older, I find that I do not function well if I don't get enough sleep, but I find my sleep is more messed up. I like to nap and often feel ready for one around 4:00 p.m., which is never a good thing when our department schedules meeting or talks for that time.

Mayer admits to a sometimes-failing memory and uses “workarounds” to retain information. He said, “I can't trust myself to remember things, so I write everything down and have different systems for noting and remembering things.” Mayer uses a monthly paper calendar to record appointments, a yellow pad to list his weekly goals and plans, and Post-it notes to signal what he plans to accomplish that day. Mayer said, “This system keeps me focused on what I'm trying to accomplish long term, medium term, and short term.”

Mayer also deals with the prospects of aging and retirement by avoiding them. Mayer said, “I try not to think about retirement. I try to look forward, not back.” That sentiment was instilled in him years ago by his father who said, “Don't read your own press clippings.” Mayer understands and lives that. Mayer said:

If you spend too much time looking at what others say about you, then you're just that. I try not to take criticism or accolades I receive too seriously. I try to remain focused on my work. There is only so much time in the day to accomplish something.

Wisdom Years Conclusions

1. Love your job. Enjoying one's work can help one persist well into their wisdom years. Mayer said, “I enjoy what I'm doing. My work makes me happy, and I'll keep doing it as long as I can.”
2. Remain curious. Mayer said, “The thing that really keeps me going is my curiosity to pursue burning questions I really want to answer and to potentially discover something new and worthwhile.”
3. Early experiences can shape one's outlook and career. Mayer said that his Midwest upbringing gave him “a sense of autonomy and adventure and the confidence” that he “could learn and handle anything.”

4. Pay attention when the universe conspires. Mayer's early work scoring psychology tests with his father and the first course he serendipitously took in college might have been the universe conspiring for him to study problem solving.
5. Remain productive. Mayer found these things instrumental in maintaining productivity: Collaboration, time management, autonomy, and growth mindset.
6. Regulate aging. Mayer relied on his wealth of experience, health maintenance, and workarounds to offset aging decrements.
7. Dismiss retirement. Mayer said, "I have no interest in retiring... I simply don't like the idea of retirement. I just don't understand it, and it rubs me the wrong way. My entire life I have tried to work hard and be productive, so then to suddenly say 'I'm going to stop producing now' just doesn't seem right." Although Mayer could draw the same salary and benefits without working, he dismisses retirement and chooses to work well into his wisdom years.

Nancy Shank: Exit Academia Stage Left

In March 2022, an original play titled "This Mortal Life Also," based on renowned theologian and pacifist Dietrich Bonhoeffer, debuted to sold out performances at The Carson Theater in Lincoln, Nebraska. The playwright was academic turned playwright Dr. Nancy Shank.

Academic Career

Shank earned her Ph.D. in human sciences in 2011 from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln where she served as associate director of the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center from 1998 to 2020. Shank also held a research professorship and investigated civil and government systems and community engagement. Shank enjoyed her public policy work. Shank said:

I really loved public policy and working at the university really kept me interested in things like how people self-organize and the ideas of power, parties, and citizen voice. I also loved creating the public policy center and helping build it into an organization with 20 researchers doing work throughout the United States.

Career Shift

Shank was being called by another passion: writing. Shank had tried to write a novel in her twenties but was unsuccessful then. Shank said, "It pretty much went nowhere. I never finished it, and it wasn't very good. I just couldn't figure out how to structure it well and tell a good story." But her interest in storytelling never waned, and she returned to writing in 2014 while working full time at the policy center. Shank said:

I really wanted to see if I could figure out how to crack the storytelling code, because I felt there was a code there that I was unable to crack earlier, and it just kept nagging me. I wanted to learn to tell better stories.

Shank worked on her writing in the evenings, on weekends, and during holiday breaks when she had “two glorious weeks to just write and make lots of headway.” She had a lot to learn. Shank recalls her initial attempt at play writing, “I sat in front of my computer, fingers hovering over the keyboard ready to go, when I realized I didn’t know how to format a script. So the first thing I did was Google, ‘How to format a script.’”

After writing part time for 6 years, Shank felt her writing passion pulling her from her university position. Shank said, “Things got to the point where when I was at work, I felt like I wasn’t doing what I truly wanted to be doing, so I took early retirement from the university.” Shank retired from her university position in 2020, while in her mid-fifties, to pursue writing full time. As Shank weighed the decision to leave her university position and pursue a writing career, she thought: “I wanted to do more. I wanted to spend more time writing. None of us are promised anything, and if I’m going to accomplish the things I want to accomplish, I really need to get started now.”

Not that Shank had full confidence in her life-altering decision. She said had doubts. Shank said:

Even though I officially retired from the university to become a playwright, I was very quiet about telling people what I was doing because, honestly, it seemed like a cockamamie scheme. People don’t know playwrights. And, I had no idea if my play would ever be produced. It seemed like a crazy thing to do...Officially, I told people I was following my curiosity, whatever that means, but it seemed to satisfy them.

Shank also had to mold her husband’s expectations when he offered ideas for how she might spend her retirement. Shank told him, “Let’s both be very clear on this. I’m not retired. I am now working at writing. That is my new career.” In retrospect, Shank delights in her career transformation. Shank said:

I didn’t retire from the university; I was retiring to a new life I really wanted to explore. Retiring from something puts too much emphasis on what is gone. Retiring to new things excites you... I have friends who retired and just wanted to spend a year figuring out what they wanted to do next. That’s too loosey-goosey for me. I knew exactly what I was going to do.

Shank relishes her new writing career and the freedom and learning opportunities it allows. Shank said:

I spent 30 years at the university working forty-hour weeks and keeping track of my time. Now, I no longer keep track of my time and have no billable hours. I’m done with that. I enjoy my freedom... I promised myself I was not going to be a task master to myself, that I was not going to be a horrible boss. I promised myself that I was going to be a great boss and decide

each day how I want to spend my time... Every day is completely different. There is no typical day. If I want to play tennis, I play tennis. I definitely love this lifestyle.

She also cherishes the learning opportunities. Shank said, “My lifestyle affords greater opportunities for exploration and learning. I’m learning so much, from how to format a script to how a play gets produced. While the end is completely unknown, my ability to control and learn from what happens is endless.”

Early Experience

The seeds for Shank’s playwriting and her debut play on theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer can be traced to Shank’s childhood experiences. One was reading. Shank said:

I’ve always been a huge reader. I remember during fifth grade recess, all the kids were playing, and I sat in a garden area reading. The librarian approached me one day and was amazed that I was reading instead of playing. I thought, ‘I guess I’m just a weirdo if she’s so amazed by this.’ Today, I’m someone who loves to read and am nourished from reading. Reading supports my writing.

In writing “This Mortal Life Also,” Shank read Bonhoeffer’s books and many biographies and scholarly articles in preparation. Shank’s modern-day novel, which is in the works, is about finding community in unexpected places, and it was inspired by her reading of *North and South*, a nineteenth century novel by Elizabeth Gaskell. And the curious last word in her play title, “This Mortal Life Also,” comes from Verse Four of Martin Luther’s “Mighty Fortress,” which was Dietrich Bonhoeffer’s favorite hymn.

A second formative experience was seeing her first Broadway show while on a high school field trip. Shank saw “A Chorus Line” at the Shubert Theatre.

I was seated in the last row of the highest balcony. But I remember looking down at the teeny tiny stage and thinking, ‘I have no idea what this is all about, but I love it. And I want to know what this is all about.’ Ever since then, I’ve loved the theater.

Shank now approaches her writing via the stage. As Shank researched Dietrich Bonhoeffer, with the thought of writing about his journey from pacifist to theologian to contemplating Hitler’s assassination, she was unable to “connect the dots.” Shank said:

One day I was thinking about him and thought, if I could see him on stage, I would understand him better because there’s nothing like the theater to catapult you into the life of someone else. You just start living that life when the lights go down and there’s that person you can practically touch. That’s when I decided to write the play in order to understand his journey. I did not begin the process by saying, ‘I want to write a play. What should I write about?’ It really was me just trying to figure out this man’s life in its cleanest form on the stage.

The third childhood experience involved her father who was a pastor. He exposed Shank to religious ideals and to Dietrich Bonhoeffer's book, *The Cost of Discipleship*, which Shank remembered seeing on his bookshelf.

Writing Career Success Factors

Several factors have helped Shank become successful in her writing career. One factor is goal setting. Shank sets annual, quarterly, and weekly goals and constructs lists outlining the tasks necessary to meet those goals. She said, "Articulating my responsibilities is motivating because I can see I'm making progress. I'm a slow writer, so it often feels like I'm slogging and not making progress until I see I am completing tasks and reaching my goals."

Although Shank's writing might seem slow at times, she understands that another writing success factor is simply getting started. Shank said:

Perhaps the hardest thing about writing is sitting down in the morning and actually starting to write, just like the hardest thing about exercise is putting on your sneakers. Once my sneakers are laced, I'm good to go, and once my fingers tap the keyboard, I'm good to go. Once started, I often reach a flow state where my mind gets going and everything else drops away. Just yesterday, I looked up to see it was seven o'clock and wondered how it ever got to be that late.

Another success-driving factor is welcoming criticism, something she perfected in her previous university position. Shank said, "We critiqued each other's work in a hard but collegial way knowing that our joint reports would be a product of the Policy Center. I learned to welcome criticism and not take it personally." As a writer, Shank is part of a playwright's collective where she and other aspiring playwrights meet and critique each other's work once a month. Shank said, "I fully recognize that criticism sharpens and improves my writing. I might think that something is done and it's great, but it's not, and criticism from others reveals the weaknesses." Just weeks from opening night of her debut play, Shank was still inviting critiques from the play's actors and changing script. For instance, one actor asked for more dialogue to move his character from one point to another, while another actor raised an issue about character salutations. Shank described her approach:

People have told me that playwrights are usually precious about their words, never wanting to change them, but that I don't seem very precious at all. Coming from academia, I learned I can't be precious and need to invite helpful criticism.

Physical and mental health are also important to Shank's writing success, especially as she approaches her sixties. Shank said:

I've been intentional about making sure I get exercise. I feel like I'm on top of my game physically. I'm really into tennis. I play at least three times a week for a few hours each time. Tennis is good for cardio and strength and also keeps me sharp mentally because of all the strategy involved.

Shank also has a treadmill and weights in her home that she uses when not playing tennis. Regarding mental health, Shank said she does think about her mental health:

“I do worry about my mental health because of Alzheimer’s in my family and knowing it’s genetic. So, I do worry when I have little memory lapses and wonder if it’s the beginning of something serious. Otherwise, I think I’m doing really well mentally.”

Having support is another success factor. Shank’s husband was her “hugest supporter in the world.” Shank added:

When I was in my thirties and decided to pursue a Ph.D., he didn’t even flinch and never questioned if I could do it. When I said I wanted to write a play, he said, ‘Okay. Whatever you put your mind to, you can accomplish.’ And, when I wanted to leave the university, we had lots of conversations about how to make that work, and he was extremely supportive.

Finally, Shank simply has a passion for writing, for trying to tell that good story that eluded her in her twenties. Part of the solution comes by focusing on writing’s constructive aspects. Shank said:

There must be intricate construction. Everything must be tightly constructed and woven together. Everything has to be interlocked. When you introduce a theme, it must be carried through and resolved. Characters can’t be flat; they need texture. They can’t be there for nothing. I believe it was Chekhov who famously said, ‘You can’t introduce a gun in Act One and not have it go off by the end of the play.’

Shank’s improved story telling also stems from following her curiosity and opening her soul. Shank said, “It’s all about curiosity for me. I become curious about something and then dig deep to uncover it and tell its story.” Shank also said, “Storytelling leaves you vulnerable as you communicate your personal view of the world. I think it was Hemingway who said, ‘Writing is easy. All you do is open up a vein and bleed.’”

Wisdom Years Conclusions

1. Age is not an issue. Shank left the university to begin her full-time writing career in her mid-fifties.
2. Good might not be good enough. Shank had a productive and successful career as an academic, but it was not enough. Shank said, “I felt like I wasn’t doing what I truly wanted to be doing. I wanted to do more. I wanted to spend more time writing.”
3. Don’t wait. Shank said, “None of us are promised anything, and if I’m going to accomplish the things I want to accomplish, I really need to get started now.”
4. Retire to, not from. Shank said, “I didn’t retire from the university, I was retiring to a new life I really wanted to explore. Retiring from something puts too much emphasis on what is gone. Retiring to new things excites you.”

5. Build a foundation for success. Shank's childhood experiences and her university position provided a strong foundation for writing success. So too did her life and work habits such as maintaining good health, goal setting, welcoming criticism, family support, and passion and dedication for writing.

John Cook: Winning in the Wisdom Years

The team has won five national championships, is among the most winningest in the nation all time, has been ranked in every National Poll since the Poll's inception in 1982, has spent more weeks ranked Number 1 than any other team, and routinely leads the nation in attendance. No, not Alabama football, Nebraska women's volleyball. The University of Nebraska Huskers' volleyball coach since 2000 is John Cook, who orchestrated four of those national championships, seven other semifinal appearances, and has collected an arms-full of national coaching awards.

Now at age 66, Cook may be contemplating retirement on a Wyoming ranch, but for now, he is not slowing down and is at the top of his game. His team last season fell just three points short of another national title. This year's squad is ranked Number 1, and Cook has attracted one of the nation's top recruiting classes several years running. Cook said:

I'm in one of the best zones I've ever been in. I can anticipate what's going to happen before it happens, and when it happens, I understand how to deal with it. I have answers now where before I may not have.

Cook attributes his growth to his wisdom years' experience. He said, "Being in the zone is the result of years of accumulated coaching experience. I can draw from those experiences, that wisdom, quite automatically."

Set One: Cook's Path to Volleyball Coaching

Cook was raised on a lemon ranch in Chula Vista, California. It was a Charlie Brown life of running free and game playing with no adults in sight. Those games were perhaps the first pipeline to Cook's coaching career. He said, "I was always the one in charge, making up the games, the teams, and the rules. We'd play all day long." Later, Cook's athleticism was noticed by a coach at his junior high school who pulled Cook aside and told him he could be a college athlete. That encounter produced two outcomes: Cook playing college basketball at the University of California, San Diego, and Cook's decision to enter the coaching profession. Cook said, "The coach pulling me aside changed my perspective about what's possible in my life and showed me how impactful a single encounter can be. I wanted to do that for others." Another volleyball coaching precursor came when Cook and his friends started playing volleyball on the San Diego beaches. He learned the game and became his team's defacto coach. After college, he joined the teaching ranks as a substitute teacher and helped coach high school football. Cook was soon offered a full-time teaching and coaching position, but his coaching position was in girls' volleyball. He took the job hoping there would be a quick return to football coaching. That never happened. Thirty years later, Cook is still coaching women's volleyball, but at its highest level.

Set Two: Coaching with Love

In 2008, Cook appeared to have it all. He was leading one of the country's most storied women's volleyball teams, had two national titles under his belt, and was having a "magical season." The magic ended when the Huskers lost a nail-biting Final Four national semifinal game. After that, Cook lost his "fire and passion" and was left struggling with self-doubt and crushed expectations that affected his coaching and his health.

I felt so much pressure and fear of failure that I would take it out on our players and put too much on them, be too hard on them, and blame them if we didn't do well. I was burned out. I started wondering if it was time to get out.

Then things turned physical. Cook said, "I woke up one morning and the world was upside down. Physically, I felt rotten."

Cook consulted doctors, and stress was the diagnosis. He began cognitive behavioral therapy to replace faulty emotional response patterns with more desirable ones. Cook said, "It was a game changer for me, flipped everything back. I found a new fire and passion and have been going strong since." Cook's personal transformation led to a coaching transformation, a new coaching style that has endured in his wisdom years. Cook said, "I decided I had to start coaching with love."

Cook compared his coaching style then and now. Cook said, "Twenty years ago, I didn't care if players were unhappy. If they didn't like how I coached, I could care less. I had no interest in their feelings. The only interest I had was how they performed on the court."

After his transformation, Cook realized he had to change to work effectively with a new generation of players and to manage his stress. Cook said, "I realized I had to build relationships and get to know them better so that I could push them without them fighting it." He has followed that plan every year since. Cook said, "I write notes to myself throughout every season reminding me to coach with love."

Cook has embraced his positive coaching role. On the court, he is calmer and more patient. Practices are still tough but more enjoyable. Off the court, he builds relationships with players. Throughout the season, players keep journals about how they are doing and feeling. Cook reads their journals regularly and writes back to them. He meets players for coffee. In 2022, Cook, his assistants, and players spent 8 days in Hawaii playing beach volleyball and bonding. Cook said:

We split the team up for nightly dinners, a coach and four players, and no phones. All the dinners were three to four hours. I just listened to the girls talk and got to know and understand and appreciate them on a deeper level.

Set Three: Acing the Wisdom Years with Healthy Habits and Self Growth

Cook's coaching job is arduous. Leading one of the country's premier collegiate volleyball teams means extensive travel and days stocked with meetings, practices, and commitments. To survive and thrive, Cook prioritizes his personal health. He said, "I've learned that the older I get, the harder I need to work out. Once you stop,

conditioning goes fast.” To maintain conditioning, Cook works out in his office each day riding a stationary exercise bike, lifting weights, or doing yoga. He also mixes in “yoga-type” breathing throughout the day to stay relaxed and centered. His meals at the training table and at home are health based. Cook values his sleep and tracks it and other health indicators with an “awesome” health watch that monitors sleep time, stages, and cycles as well as workload and recovery time, even providing recommendations on when to go to bed. Still, Cook is often awakened at night thinking about a “new drill I want to try or things the team should work on.” Cook said, “I have a notepad by my bed, so I’ll write these ideas down and then try to go back to sleep.” Cook also recognizes that he must occasionally escape from his coaching duties to reduce stress and remain fresh. Toward that end, Cook has recently discovered a new vocation: horseback riding. Cook said, “I bought a horse, and I love riding it. It’s one of the few times I don’t think about volleyball.”

Like a shark that must keep moving to survive, Cook is on the move in his wisdom years trying to better himself and the team. Cook said, “I’ve come to realize that the longer I coach, the less I know. So, I’m always trying to learn, and learning keeps you from burning out because you’re getting better.” One way Cook continues to learn is by listening to podcasts and reading extensively, especially books on stress reduction and on coaching. Another way that Cook learns is through critical analysis. Every day he asks himself this question: “Did I do a good enough job coaching today that my players are excited to come back for practice tomorrow?” Cook said, “There’s some days I leave practice and think, ‘Gosh, I was bad today. I have to be better tomorrow.’ I try to evaluate myself each day and formulate a plan for being better the next.” Cook asks himself another question each morning that keeps him growing in his wisdom years. Cook said:

Who needs me today? Is it someone in my family, one of my players or coaches? That single question prompts me to look for those in need throughout the day that I might help. And helping others adds greater meaning to my own days and life.

Match Point

Cook’s coaching contract runs through January 2024, and retirement is perhaps on the Wyoming horizon. Cook has purchased a ranch in Wyoming where he will ride horses and perhaps run a snow removal business with his son once he retires. Cook is also contemplating developing a master’s degree program in coaching at the University of Nebraska and teaching some of its courses. Cook said:

You just don’t quit cold turkey and say, ‘What am I going to do with my life now?’ So, I’m positioning myself for when I do retire. I’m creating a place so when that day happens, when I’ve had enough, I have a place to go, instead of thinking ‘now what?’ I’ve heard of people that quit their jobs, don’t know what to do next, and are miserable.

Until the match is complete and Cook shakes retirement’s hand across the net, he remains fully committed to and passionate about Husker volleyball. Cook said,

“I love these kids, and I love the journeys we take together every season. I love the challenge of reinventing and growing myself and Nebraska volleyball each and every season.”

Wisdom Years Conclusions

1. The wisdom years yields wisdom accumulated over a lifetime of experience. Cook attributes his “being in the zone” career-best coaching to his accumulated knowledge.
2. One’s youth experiences can pave one’s career path. For Cook, childhood play, a coach’s momentary intervention, and the San Diego beach volleyball scene were among the precursors to Cook’s volleyball coaching career.
3. Obstacles arise but can be overcome and make you stronger. Cook sought support from doctors and therapists to overcome his mental health struggles. He emerged a healthier person and a better, more loving coach.
4. Success in the wisdom years requires health maintenance. Cook eats healthy, exercises daily, monitors sleep, and takes time to breathe and relax.
5. Learning and growth do not stop in the wisdom years. Cook recognizes his own deficits and continues to learn and try new things looking for ways to improve himself and his team.
6. Prepare the nest. Although Cook remains fully committed to coaching Husker volleyball, he has bought a home in Wyoming, contemplated a family business, and investigated the prospects of creating a master’s degree program in coaching—things that might serve as his next wisdom years adventure.

Judy Woodruff: A Lifelong Commitment to Getting the Story Right

In the late 1960s at WQXI-TV station in Atlanta, Georgia, Judy Woodruff began her journalism career unceremoniously and behind the scenes by emptying trash and getting coffee. Her journalism future looked bleaker still because female reporters at that time were relegated to reporting on bake sales and social topics, and editors were unlikely to promote them. Now, more than 50 years later, Woodruff is among the most revered, iconic, and long-standing news correspondents and news anchors of all time. Woodruff was a White House correspondent at NBC where she covered Ronald Reagan’s attempted assassination in 1981. Other professional highlights include Chief Washington correspondent for PBS *NewsHour*, CNN senior correspondent and anchor, and a return to PBS *NewsHour* in 2007, where she was co-anchor from 2013 until 2016 and sole anchor since then. Now, at age 75, Woodruff is still investigating and reporting the news at PBS well into her wisdom years.¹

¹ Shortly following our interview, Woodruff announced that she will stop anchoring the *NewsHour* in 2022 but plans to stay on with PBS writing, reporting, and working on special projects through the 2024 presidential election.

How Woodruff's News Career Began

Woodruff's path to White House correspondent and national news anchor was fueled by childhood experiences and shaped by sexism. Woodruff's mother dropped out of high school, and her father joined the military to avoid life in the North Carolina cotton mills. The family's transient military life in the USA and overseas offered Woodruff a worldly view of people and places and the confidence to one day pursue a career at a time when most women, including her mother, did not work outside the home, Woodruff said:

During my childhood, I knew only a few women who were active in public life or had careers. So, I just imagined that I was going to have a career that was going to be meaningful. I was going to contribute in some way.

Another childhood inspiration came when President John F. Kennedy told the nation, "Ask not what your country can do for you, but what you can do for your country." Woodruff said that Kennedy's call to lead a civic life was "ingrained" in her from that day and "just waiting to be awakened."

The awakening, though, was stalled by the slow acceleration of the women's movement. One of Woodruff's college professors discouraged her from her intended math studies. Woodruff said, "The professor treated all the women like we were idiots, that we shouldn't be studying advanced math." Woodruff switched majors to political science, intending to pursue a political career, only to be dissuaded again when women working on Capitol Hill told her she would be nothing more than a coffee girl and would have to wait years to make a difference. The awakening finally occurred when a professor encouraged her to become a journalist as a means for pursuing her political interests, Woodruff said:

It was that serendipitous conversation that turned me toward news investigation and reporting... My interest in public service morphed into explaining what public leaders are doing and what makes them tick rather than planting a flag in one party or another and working on one side of the aisle.

Remaining Behind the Desk

A desk job might be considered a tranquil way to spend one's wisdom years. That is hardly the case for Woodruff, who is the sole anchor and managing editor of the *NewsHour*. Woodruff's job is a difficult one that requires 10- to 12-h workdays. She starts her day at her Washington D.C. condo where she reads the news, prepares for interviews, and leads a 9:00 a.m. news meeting remotely during the pandemic. She drives to the news studio around 1:00 p.m. to prepare to record the hour-long, live broadcast at 6:00 p.m., which is viewed by almost three million people (The PBS *NewsHour* of Today, 2022). Three days a week, she stops on the way to the studio to get her hair styled. Once at the studio, she conducts pre-taped interviews; researches stories, issues, or guests; writes interview questions; and edits news scripts. Woodruff said, "I do all my own preparation for an interview. After collecting research from colleagues and adding my own, I write the questions, construct the interview,

and conceptualize the story.” She interviews newsmakers at the highest levels including presidents and world leaders. Midway through 2022, she interviewed Secretary of State Antony Blinken, Vice President Kamala Harris, Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, and Estonian Prime Minister Kaja Kallas, among others.

Woodruff typically returns home to her Washington D.C. condo around 7:30 p.m. She eats dinner with her husband, usually leftovers or take out because she “does not have time to cook.” After dinner, she spends the evening at the computer, working on other stories, staying in contact with sources, and reading. The busyness suits her. Woodruff said, “I’m not a person who likes to sit, and so even though I love to just have quiet time to sit and read the newspaper or read a book on the weekends, I just don’t have enough of that time right now.”

As to why Woodruff has remained behind the anchor desk well into her wisdom years, Woodruff credits her professional duty and her passion for journalism for keeping her motivated and productive. Woodruff said:

It has been a dream for me to be able to work in a field where the news is changing every day, and I get to think about it and report it. I’m sure it’s helped keep me vibrant and young... I love the fact that I can in a small way, every day, contribute to the public’s understanding of what’s going on in the world and around us. I understand that I have a big responsibility as the anchor of the of the *NewsHour* to convey news and information in a way that people can trust. They can count on it being something they can believe in that’s credible. I take that very seriously, and it’s such an important role. I just can’t emphasize enough how much I’m driven by a desire to get the story right and to not make mistakes.

Even after 50 years, Woodruff said she has the job of her dreams. “I love my work. I feel like I’m the luckiest person in television journalism to be doing the job than I am.”

The Longevity Keys

Anchoring a national nightly news show is a demanding job, especially at age 75, and Woodruff has taken steps to meet that demand in her wisdom years. Her first line of defense against fatigue and aging is exercise and sleep. Woodruff exercises for an hour first thing in the morning 3 days a week. During the COVID-19 pandemic when her gym was closed, Woodruff stayed fit by repeatedly climbing the 10 flights of stairs in her condo building.

Woodruff strives to get 6 or 7 hs of sleep each night—an increase from her White House correspondent days. Woodruff said:

Now I know that I really need sleep. I used to be able to get by on four or five hours. Now if I don’t get six to seven hours of sleep every night, I just don’t function at my peak. To get those extra hours, I give up 30 minutes of research and reading I might ordinarily do and spend that time sleeping.

Woodruff's family structure and dynamics offer another key to her longevity. Because Woodruff's children are grown and her husband is himself a tireless worker, Woodruff can dedicate most of her time to work. Although her husband, Al Hunt, is a retired *Wall Street Journal* reporter, Hunt keeps busy recording a weekly podcast with political consultant James Carville, writing a weekly column for *The Hill*, and teaching a college class. Woodruff and Hunt are a perfect pair, both driven, task-oriented, and supportive of each other. Woodruff said, "He has been a good influence on me. He doesn't believe in letting moss grow. He's never not busy. He only knows one speed."

Woodruff is the same way. As Woodruff contemplates joining her husband in retirement, she intends to keep busy. Woodruff said:

I don't want to be floundering around and having no responsibilities. I can't imagine just having a blank slate each day and sleeping till noon. I want to be engaged in some way, whether it's working with young journalists, writing another book, or working on important causes like helping those with disabilities. I can't see just doing nothing. I wouldn't be happy doing that. Working has kept me young. I'm sure that it has.

Woodruff's contemporaries have also inspired her to keep working. Her journalist friends Andrea Mitchell, age 75, and Lesley Stahl, age 80, are still working for *NBC News* and *60 Minutes*, respectively. Woodruff also points to Mitchell's husband, Alan Greenspan, former chairman of the Federal Reserve, "who, for goodness sake, is still writing at age 96." Woodruff concluded, "We're surrounded by people who are a lot older but are still active and contributing. That keeps me going too."

Finally, Woodruff's longevity is a product of her motivation to learn, improve, and perfect. Fifty years as a journalist and Woodruff is still a stickler for accuracy and still challenges herself to do better. Woodruff said:

I tend to be very hard on myself. I'm very judgmental about everything I do. I'm looking at every interview, at every story, and thinking, 'What did I get wrong? What should I have done better?' I'm constantly judging. For me, my work is a continuous learning experience.

Woodruff said that experience has made her job easier in some ways, such as interviewing.

After doing interviews all these years, I do feel more comfortable. I don't get as worked up and anxious now interviewing the prime minister of somewhere as I did earlier in my career. Today, I'm fortunate I have the experience and the ability to handle interviews or other tasks, but I have never become so confident that I take my work for granted. There's a fine line there. I want to have confidence that I can get something done, but I never want to be so sure of myself that I'm not learning. So, I still view every day as a learning experience, and I still recognize that I make mistakes. Therefore, I remain very hard on myself.

Woodruff is also learning about and respecting her wisdom years' limitations. For example, she might hold onto a stair banister to prevent falling, and she might occasionally struggle to remember things. Woodruff said:

What I've decided is that after you've lived for this long, there's so many experiences in your head that you just can't possibly pull out at a moment's notice. There are so many things I've covered for which I have no memory. It's very frustrating.

Yet, these age-related issues have not slowed her down. Woodruff said:

I just don't feel that old. I've been healthy so far, and I don't take that for granted. But, I know I'm not immortal. I'm going to die. But for now, there is still work to be done, and I hope to live long enough to see my grandchildren grow.

Wisdom Years Conclusions

1. One's career and wisdom years work can be prompted by a single event, which could easily be missed, such as President Kennedy's call to lead a civic life. Judy Woodruff heard and answered this call.
2. Age need not slow you down. Woodruff's wisdom years work is still conducted at a fever pace.
3. Follow and feed your wisdom years passion. Woodruff's work is a labor of love. She said, "It has been a dream for me to be able to work in a field where the news is changing every day, and I get to think about it and report it. I'm sure it's helped keep me vibrant and young."
4. Make health a priority. Woodruff's first line of defense against fatigue and aging is exercise and sleep.
5. Find supporters and role models who inspire you. Woodruff is inspired by her equally hard-working husband and some news correspondent contemporaries, all working well into their wisdom years.

John Rosenow: Growing Trees, Then Children—Who Grow Trees

When we plant trees, we plant the seeds of peace and seeds of hope. We also secure the future of our children—Wangari Maathai

When Arbor Day Foundation founder and chief executive John Rosenow wrote *Living Long & Living Well* in 2014, he was searching for models who might inspire him to remain productive and creative in his wisdom years. Perhaps his most inspiring model was Nobel Peace Prize recipient Wangari Maathai who, like Rosenow, dedicated her life to planting trees. Maathai established The Green Belt Movement, which resulted in the planting of more than 12 billion trees in more than 190 countries. Maathai's tree-planting advocacy and legacy continued well into her wisdom years.

Rosenow began his tree planting advocacy when he founded Arbor Day Foundation at age 21. He served as Arbor Day's chief executive for 44 years until age 65. In that capacity, Rosenow grew the organization to more than a million tree-planting members, created the Tree City USA urban forestry program, developed Lied Lodge & Conference Center at Arbor Day Farm in Nebraska City, Nebraska, and oversaw programs that led to the planting of 250 million trees across five continents.

Handing over the Arbor Day reins to his successor and being 65, the time might have seemed ripe for Rosenow's retirement. Instead, Rosenow shifted his tree-growing attention to growing children who understand, value, cherish, and protect the natural world, which includes the continued planting of trees. Rosenow did so by joining forces with Dimensions Educational Research Foundation and their Nature Explore program, whose mission is to teach children to explore and embrace nature through play in natural outdoor classrooms they help build and to support the adults and children using those classrooms. Nature Explore's mission to make the natural world a meaningful part of children's daily lives through the creation of intentionally designed, nature-rich learning environments aligns closely with Rosenow's passion for the outdoors and his quest to educate people to be good stewards of the earth.

Growing Children Through Nature Explore

Rosenow is Dimensions' director of development. His primary role is fundraising. In that role, Rosenow capitalizes on his decades of Arbor Day leadership experience, fundraising strategies, and relationship building to expand Dimensions' impact on early childhood nature education. Sending out fund raising letters might seem like pedestrian work, but Rosenow treats it as a key educational and mission-enhancement opportunity—part art and part science. The art comes in the relationships he creates and nurtures; the science comes in the information he gathers, his meticulous writing, and the formative evaluations he conducts. Recently, his seemingly minor changes and additions to a client's fundraising campaign netted an 8% increase in donors and a \$600,000 annual financial gain.

Rosenow does more than recruit donors and raise money; he is also instrumental in establishing new Nature Explore classrooms and advising educators as they design their outdoor classrooms and develop their early childhood nature education programs. In low-income areas of Los Angeles, for example, Rosenow has been instrumental in supporting the creation of dozens of Nature Explore classrooms. Rosenow said:

The teachers and administrators we work with are just thrilled with these outdoor learning environments and how they help children gain confidence and thrive in and enjoy school. In the beginning, we had to do some real selling with principals to get them to try something new. But now that they and others are seeing the classrooms transform children, including the most challenged children, promoting outdoor classrooms seems no harder than planting trees.

At the time of this interview, Rosenow, age 72, was about to retire from Dimensions, along with his wife, Nancy Rosenow, the Dimensions founder and executive director. John Rosenow's next wisdom years challenge is working as an independent consultant helping various nonprofits whose nature-related work he values and supports. Rosenow said:

My new role is to support nonprofits with their fundraising, to recruit and renew members, and to attract donors—not just those willing to give money,

but those willing to be personally involved in the work of the organization. So that's my new wisdom years' direction, consulting for a few nonprofits that I care deeply about because they focus on preserving and promoting nature. And for now, that's the way I can best contribute to what's been my lifetime mission of growing a better world one tree or one child at a time.

The Seeds of Rosenow's Nature Dedicated Career

Rosenow credits his emotional attachment to nature that was planted and cultivated on the farm where he was raised for his life's work planting trees and helping children understand and appreciate nature. Rosenow believes that environmental education must have an emotional component. He said, "One thing we've learned in our Nature Explore work is that nature education, whether the topic is bird habitats or climate change, must be built on a foundation of early emotional attachment." Rosenow garnered that emotional connection to nature growing up on the family farm. Rosenow said:

We were connected to nature on our farm. My parents stressed the importance of eating what you raise whenever possible and saving what you can to see you through the lean times. There was a natural cycle, including eating pork, beef, and chicken from animals we raised ourselves. I was in nature a lot and had an emotional attachment to the land. I can still taste the ripened berries I picked from the bushes by our home, and the cherries, peaches, apricots, mulberries, and apples picked from the trees in our orchard. I enjoyed living among trees and sensing the birds and wildlife they welcomed. I wanted others to have such experiences as well.

While farm life was an impetus for Rosenow's career direction, it was a master's program project that was the impetus for his wisdom years' work ethic and productivity. While earning his masters in spiritual psychology at the University of Santa Monica, Rosenow was assigned an open-ended, year-long project. True to his interests, Rosenow decided to study people who had made contributions to the natural or spiritual world in their later years. Rosenow's (2014) foundational work on this project eventually evolved into his book, *Living Long & Living Well: Inspiring Stories of Creating and Contributing During the Wisdom Years*. Rosenow learned about himself through the process. He said:

I was contemplating how I might remain productive as I aged and thought I might get direction and inspiration from those who made significant contributions in their wisdom years. I got many different, surprising, and helpful ideas for continuing my own career. For example, I saw 1800s landscape architect Frederick Law Olmsted simply keep doing what he had always done into his seventies. I saw comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell quit his university position to focus exclusively on his writing. I was inspired by Nelson Mandela doing his best work as a political activist and leader after spending 27 years in

prison. And I learned about the healthy habits necessary to remain productive and how unhealthy habits like smoking can sadly end a legendary career as it did for Walt Disney. Overall, I learned that success can continue well into one's wisdom years and that there is no single or secret formula for success. That knowledge freed me up mentally and emotionally to emulate these people and to carry my environmental work into my wisdom years.

Keys to Remaining Passionate and Productive in the Wisdom Years

Just like the trees around him, Rosenow is adding life rings to his trunk and watching once healthy branches fall away. Five years ago, Rosenow was diagnosed with Parkinson's disease. This year, hip surgery is on the table. Rosenow's Parkinson's situation appears relatively minor for now. Rosenow said:

I'm blessed to have minor symptoms. Parkinson's is a strange affliction with a long list of potential symptoms, some of which I experience. I've lost 90% of my sense of smell. I sometimes experience minor hand tremors, my memory isn't what it once was, and I can't type as fast as I once did. So, I type more slowly, and I take good notes to supplement my memory. I've learned to make the best of it, do what I can, and not worry about what I can't do.

Regarding his bum hip, Rosenow lamented that he no longer can play pick-up basketball games or ride his bike to work. Regarding his general aging, Rosenow admits to slowing down, saying, "I just don't have the energy that I had when I was 25. I'm not going to set the alarm at 5:00 in the morning, pop out of bed, and start my work. That's my past."

Rosenow takes steps to bolster his health and remain active and productive in his wisdom years, much the same as the wisdom years people he studied. In terms of exercise, Rosenow takes daily walks on nature trails and performs daily Qigong exercises that optimize posture, movement, breathing, and balance. In terms of diet, Rosenow has transitioned to a mostly vegan diet, a departure from his meat-based farm upbringing.

Rosenow bolsters his emotional health by spending time with close friends and family, especially wife Nancy, and avoiding relationships with people who are negative or stressful. On the flip side, Rosenow naturally exudes positive energy when speaking to a group or exchanging greetings and smiles with passersby on the trails. He said, "It's those little things that add to the richness of life." Rosenow was, of course, positive when asked to reflect on his career. He said, "Throughout my life, I've enjoyed all the stages from childhood to high school to college to Arbor Day to Dimensions to private consulting. I couldn't say that any one stage was better than another. I've loved it all." Rosenow also finds pleasure, enlightenment, and emotional well-being by reading every day. One of his favorites is the 2013 book *One Mind: How Our Individual Mind is Part of a Greater Consciousness and Why it Matters* by Dr. Larry Dossey (2013). Rosenow said, "It's a fascinating book showing that all people, all life, is connected."

Wisdom Years Conclusions

1. Wisdom years inspiration can come from reading about the wisdom years accomplishments of others, as it did for Rosenow.
2. Wisdom years interests can shift, as they did for Rosenow as his interests shifted from trees to children, but changing interests likely share a common element. In Rosenow's case that was the love of nature.
3. One's career calling and wisdom years inspiration might stem from personal experiences. It was Rosenow's early farm life that influenced him to found Arbor Day Foundation, and it was his book project that inspired him to maintain productivity in his wisdom years.
4. Exploit strengths rather than shore up weaknesses. Even dealing with Parkinson's, Rosenow said, "I've learned to make the best of it, build on what I can do well, and not worry about what I can't do." That wisdom years advice fits with Howard Gardner's (1997) leveraging principle, which advocates for exploiting strengths rather than shoring up weaknesses.
5. Make physical and mental health a priority. Following in the footsteps of the wisdom years luminaries he studied, Rosenow makes his physical and mental health a priority by exercising, eating a vegetarian diet, enjoying the companionship and support of loved ones, and avoiding toxic relationships.

Wander Women: Blazing the Retirement Trail

Seven years ago, they quit their jobs, sold their homes, abandoned their possessions, and set out to see America, one nomadic step at a time, and they are still going strong. Among their travels are the Appalachian Trail (2190 miles) stretching from Georgia to Maine, the Continental Divide Trail (3028 miles) up and down America's central spine, and the Pacific Crest Trail (2653 miles) linking Mexico and Canada along the Pacific Coast. They are (two-thirds of) the Wander Women: Kristy Burns (age 58) and Annette Demel (age 65).

Setting Out

Partners living in Colorado Springs, Colorado, Burns was a Licensed Professional Counselor, working in private practice and specializing in infant mental health, and Demel was a public-school teacher and librarian. They loved their jobs, both the work and the opportunities to enjoy weekend adventures that included hiking, backpacking, running, bicycling, and swimming.

One afternoon, about 7 years ago, the pair met with a financial advisor to plot their future. The advisor overwhelmed them with financial pie charts and employment timelines stretching into their seventies. They left the meeting wondering if the work-until-seventy path was right for them. That same afternoon, they met friends at a bookstore, where they stumbled upon a book called *Die Broke* (Pollan & Levine, 1998), whose first line was, "Quit your job." They said:

We bought the book and read it that night. It talked about the value of time versus money. About the time you have left and how you want to spend it. About how you can compromise other parts of your life to have more time. We thought, 'That's what we're supposed to do, not work into our seventies. We should just sell everything we own and go adventuring.' And from that point on, we never looked at the world the same. We saw our present lives as typical, predictable: Get educated, get a job, get a house, paint the porch, do the yardwork, buy stuff, and keep buying stuff. Suddenly, we didn't want our stuff and couldn't wait to get rid of it. Instead of stuff, we coveted rich experiences in nature. We made a five-year plan to sell all we owned, settle our debt, get a camper, and properly plan our lives. No pie charts, just trail maps.

The Trail Has Been a Blessing

The Wander Women have been on the trail for 7 years now, and there is no plan to step off. They are enjoying the places they have been and especially cherishing the journey.

To quote Louis L'Amour, "The trail is the thing, not the end of the trail." They said:

We feel like we don't have enough time to do everything we want to do. The more we're out here, the more we learn about other adventures awaiting us. We have places to go and people to see. We're eager to experience new things and meet new people. People ask us, 'What will you do when you're in your eighties, too old to hike, and you have no place to go?' We just feel like we're going to handle whatever comes each day, the same way we handle whatever comes each day on the trail. We're not quitting. All our moments are precious.

The Trail Has Been Difficult, but the Trail Provides

Precious but sometimes difficult. They told stories of being swept down a raging river, being caught in blinding snowstorms, trudging through deep snow, temperatures plummeting near zero, scaling steep cliffs, crawling under downed trees, and scampering over boulder fields. Plus, the daily exertion of hiking 12 h and 20 miles each day carrying all your shelter, food, water, and supplies on your back. Each day, they wake at 5:00, pack their tent and gear, toss down a breakfast bar and water, and are on the trail by 6:00. They hike in 2-h stretches throughout the day, with small breaks between stretches for rest and rejuvenation. As evening approaches, they pitch their tent, set up their sleeping system, pump and filter water for the next day's hike, and prepare the evening meal, usually something hot such as ramen noodles or oatmeal. Sleep comes easily and then its rinse and repeat the next day. The women said, "Days are hard, but we love the long trails and how hard they are. We have prepared our bodies to do this." They also have come to trust the hiking maxim: "The trail provides." They said:

We can't tell you how many times we needed something on the trail, and we got it, whether it was food, water, or a ride to town. It was bizarre. One time, we were running out of food and hadn't seen anyone for three weeks, when all of a sudden, we see someone, and they gave us food. Another time, a ride

to town led to our staying in a stranger's home and enjoying a big batch of soup. You're kind of vulnerable on the trail, so a little trail magic is always welcomed.

Keeping the Body Tuned

Hiking tens of thousands of miles and sleeping on hard ground can take a toll on one's body, particularly senior citizens. Fortunately, the Wander Women are in great shape and feeling stronger as they age, saying: "We're good. The more we do, the better we feel. We had more ailments on our first through-hike than we did on the two after that. Our bodies adjusted and got stronger." The women rely on more than hiking to maintain their health. They do exercises and stretch most days to keep their bodies strong and flexible, and they eat a healthy diet to maintain weight and fitness.

Of course, there have been a few health issues. Demel experienced hip flexor pain throughout the length of the Continental Divide Trail that has since cleared up. Burns was recently diagnosed with a vascular heart issue traced to family genetics. Medication, diet, and controlling heart rate (not always an easy thing when climbing) have cleared the path for more hiking. "Nothing I can't handle," she said, "I'm spending my time exactly how I choose." When asked if age is becoming a factor in their adventure seeking, they said:

Someone might run a six-minute mile in their youth but can only run a 12-minute mile when they age. That's just a reality, but so what, there's nothing wrong with a 12-minute mile. We have no fear of aging or dying. Death is approaching us all. We'll just step into whatever comes and handle it with determination and grace the best we can. In the meantime, we hopefully have many healthy years ahead, and we expect to spend them well.

Elevation Gain

Much has been gained in the Wander Women's wonder years. First, they have grown intellectually. They said:

We use our brains a lot more than we did when we worked. Life was more monotonous then. We were good at what we did, but it became routine and often did not require much thought. On the trail, we have created a life where we are thinking all the time. We are always in a new place, researching routes and destinations, and solving unique problems.

On the trail, they are also afforded time to learn. For example, they have read and studied numerous books and have learned new languages and instruments. Second, the women have become more welcoming and confident. They said:

We've changed, even as our adventures have unfolded, we're more open to whatever comes. Plans change. We open our hearts and let life unfold rather than always try to control it. Yet, we're confident that we can make good decisions to handle whatever arises. We've acquired the wisdom to do that.

Third, they have become fulfilled and have achieved happiness. They said:

This journey has allowed us to grow, learn about ourselves, and become our best selves. There is freedom. We're not concerned about external stuff, and we don't worry about the future. We are living in the moment. And the moments are joyful and amazing. Something to be celebrated.

Finally, they have elevated to a position where they offer this advice to others pondering their wisdom years journey:

Some people are afraid to retire thinking that retirement means that life is ending. They pretend that continuing to work will keep them alive longer. We all need to confront death in order to live our best lives.... Too often, people retire and their world shrinks. Try to expand your world. Explore. Do new things. Learn new things. Meet new people. Create a valuable, challenging, inspiring, and enjoyable life.

Wisdom Years Conclusions

1. Don't hesitate to leave the workforce. Although the Wander Women loved their jobs, they quit their jobs to pursue new adventures.
2. Go to extremes if necessary to make your dreams come true. In order to set out on their nature adventures, the Wander Women not only quit their jobs but also sold their home and possessions.
3. Have faith. Although the women were nature enthusiasts, they had never attempted thousand mile through-hikes and living months in the wilderness. Still, they had faith they could do it. In *The Alchemist* (Coelho, 1988), we learn that "When you want something, the whole universe conspires in order for you to achieve it." In hiking circles, hikers know, "The trail will provide."
4. Be flexible. The Wander Women adjusted to whatever came their way. Life's trails bend, and we must bend with them.

Discussion

The purpose of this research was to explore what some people accomplish in their wisdom years, determine how they accomplish it, and inform and inspire readers contemplating their own wisdom years. To grasp the far boundary of wisdom years potential, we interviewed people who are truly elite or unique. Three of them might be considered among the best ever in their professions: Mayer in educational psychology, Woodruff in broadcast journalism, and Cook in collegiate volleyball coaching. Meanwhile, only Rosenow founded the iconic Arbor Day Foundation, while The Wander Women and Shank are also unique for their life-altering adventures and accomplishments. If we can understand how these extraordinary people are making their final chapters enjoyable and productive, we can likely benefit from their wisdom years stories.

Based on Steiner and Amabile's (2022) life cognitions, all of our interview participants were firm in the "perceiving retirement as a continuation of pursuing meaningful work" camp. In that pursuit, three of our participants can be classified as *course stayers*, who are continuing their long-standing career paths into their wisdom years. Those are the same three—Mayer, Woodruff, and Cook—who sit atop their fields. The other three participants can be classified as *course shifters*, who changed career paths nearing or in their wisdom years. They include Rosenow who shifted from Arbor Day Foundation to Dimensions to private consultant; Shank who shifted from university scholar to playwright; and the Wander Women who quit their jobs, sold their possessions, and hit the trails. Course-staying and course-shifting are wisdom years options all might consider.

Finally, the present study continued the line of wisdom years investigation pioneered by John Rosenow, one of our interviewees, who investigated 10 people who made significant wisdom years accomplishments and contributions (Rosenow, 2014). Our work differed in that Rosenow used biographical data to tell retrospective stories, whereas we used qualitative interviewing to tell unfolding contemporary stories. Regardless of methods, all the stories, past and present, are filled with wisdom years accomplishments, pathways, joy, and inspiration.

Anthropologist Margaret Mead said, "People respect age. Learn to raise your voice. People will listen." Those we interviewed kindly raised their voices. The remainder of this discussion are their voices offering wisdom years advice.

1. Do not retire. But if you do, retire to something. Mayer continues to work into his seventies despite having a university benefits package that would pay him the same salary for not working. Mayer said:

I simply don't like the idea of retirement. I just don't understand it, and it rubs me the wrong way. My entire life I have tried to work hard and be productive, so then to suddenly say 'I'm going to stop producing now' just doesn't seem right.

Shank offered this retire-to-something advice: "Retiring from something puts too much emphasis on what is gone. Retiring to new things excites you." The Wander Women added, "Too often, people retire and their world shrinks. Try to expand your world. Explore. Do new things. Learn new things. Meet new people. Create a valuable, challenging, inspiring, and enjoyable life."

2. Follow your bliss. All of the interviewees are doing what they love to do. Their wisdom years pursuits are a labor of love. Mayer said, "I enjoy what I'm doing. My work makes me happy, and I'll keep doing it as long as I can." Shank said, "I wanted to do more [than my university work]. I wanted to spend more time writing. None of us are promised anything, and if I'm going to accomplish the things I want to accomplish, I need to get started now." Both Mayer and Shank are spurred by curiosity. Mayer said, "The thing that really keeps me going is my curiosity to pursue burning questions I really want to answer and to potentially discover something new and worthwhile." Shank said, "It's all about curiosity for me. I become curious about something and then dig deep to uncover it and tell its story."

3. **Work hard.** These wisdom year luminaries are not resting on their laurels or hammocks; they are working as hard as ever. Woodruff is still spinning out laborious 10–12-h days researching, writing, and reporting the news. Cook works tirelessly at volleyball recruiting, game planning, and practices. His sleep is even interrupted by middle-of-the-night revelations. Meanwhile, the Wander Women are testing human physical limits, hiking thousands of miles across raging rivers, through blinding snowstorms, scrambling up boulder fields, and scaling steep cliffs, carrying shelter and supplies on their back.
4. **Offset aging challenges.** Mayer said:

The aging literature tells us that just about everything is moving in the wrong direction as you age. Things slow down. Reaction times slow, senses become dulled, and cognition diminishes. These are not great things. Our bodies catch up with us. We weren't really designed to live this long.

Maybe so, but these wisdom years people press on even in the face of serious health issues. Rosenow has Parkinson's disease. Cook stared down mental and physical ailments that nearly sidelined him. Mayer overcame a perplexing sensory disorder that made skin contact unbearable. And Wander Woman Burns has a vascular heart issue that is exacerbated by an elevated heart rate.

All participants offset aging challenges by leading healthy lifestyles that include daily exercise, a healthy diet, and ample sleep. In fact, regular exercise made the Wander Women stronger. They said, "The more we do, the better we feel. We had more ailments on our first through-hike than we did on the two after that. Our bodies adjusted and got stronger."

Most also recognize some mental decline and use workarounds such as note taking to compensate. Mayer said, "I can't trust myself to remember things, so I write everything down and have different systems for noting and remembering things." Participants also banked on their lifetime of experience, which only grows, to compensate for mental declines. Mayer said, "I can draw on my accumulated experiences conducting research, on my knowledge of the literature, and on my skills such as writing."

The group wisdom is to also lower expectations a bit. The Wander Women captured this by saying, "Someone might run a six-minute mile in their youth but can only run a 12-minute mile when they age. That's just a reality, but so what, there's nothing wrong with a 12-minute mile."

5. **Be inspired by role models.** Just as you might be inspired by the wisdom years people we interviewed, they, in turn, are inspired by others. Woodruff is inspired by journalist contemporaries Andrea Mitchell and Lesley Stahl who are still reporting news in their seventies and eighties, respectively. Rosenow, of course, said he is inspired by those he researched. He said:

I was contemplating how I might remain productive as I aged and thought I might get direction and inspiration from those who made significant contributions in their wisdom years. I got many different, surprising, and helpful ideas for continuing my own career.

6. **Be a Life-long Learner.** All our participants still yearn to learn. They recognize that they are not done learning and growing. Woodruff said, "I never want to be

so sure of myself that I'm not learning. So, I still view every day as a learning experience, and I still recognize that I make mistakes. Therefore, I remain very hard on myself." Shank said:

My lifestyle affords greater opportunities for exploration and learning. I'm learning so much, from how to format a script to how a play gets produced. While the end is completely unknown, my ability to control and learn from what happens is endless.

Cook said, "I've come to realize that the longer I coach, the less I know. So, I'm always trying to learn, and learning keeps you from burning out because you're getting better." Finally, the Wander Women said, "This journey has allowed us to grow, learn about ourselves, and become our best selves."

7. Take heed of the universe conspiring. *The Alchemist* author Paulo Coelho (1988) wrote, "When you want something, all the universe conspires in helping you achieve it." In each case, one or more seemingly coincidental things happened that led our interviewees onto their paths. Perhaps their wisdom years directions were the result of calculated decisions, maybe a dash of good fortune, or maybe the universe conspiring. In hiker's vernacular, the trail provides.

Mayer was led to psychology after helping his psychologist father score tests. Shank was destined for the theater after attending her first Broadway play on a high school field trip. It was John F. Kennedy's call to lead a civic life that was "ingrained" in Woodruff that day and "just waiting to be awakened," which happened later during "a serendipitous conversation that turned me toward news investigation and reporting," Woodruff said. For Rosenow, growing up on a farm and connecting with nature, particularly the trees, was his gateway to Arbor Day Foundation. Cook's carefree game-playing childhood and the simple message of a caring coach led him to volleyball coaching. The Wander Women left a sober meeting about their financial and life futures and immediately stumbled onto a book called *Die Broke*, whose first line was "Quit your job." And they did.

Psychologist Erik Erikson, who tabbed wisdom as the potential last stage in a lifetime of psychosocial development, envisioned the wisdom stage as one where people, in their mid-sixties and beyond, reflect on their lives and feel either a sense of fulfillment or a sense of failure. With all due respect to Erikson, our interviewees, most beyond their mid-sixties, were not looking back and basking in their accomplishments. They were moving forward and doing so with passion, perseverance, and productivity. Cook said:

I'm in one of the best zones I've ever been in. I can anticipate what's going to happen before it happens, and when it happens, I understand how to deal with it. I have answers now where before I may not have.

Woodruff concluded, "I just don't feel that old. I know I'm not immortal. I'm going to die. But for now, there is still work to be done."

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