



The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk, and Adventure in the 25 Years After 50

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot

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In the twenty-first century, a developmental phase of life is emerging as significant and distinct, capturing our interest, engaging our curiosity, and expanding our understanding of human potential and development. Demographers talk about this new chapter in life as characterized by peopleâ€™”between fifty and seventy-fiveâ€™”who are considered â€™neither young nor old.â€™ In our â€™third chaptersâ€™ we are beginning to redefine our views about the casualties and opportunities of aging; we are challenging cultural definitions of strength, maturity, power, and sexiness.

This is a chapter in life when the traditional norms, rules, and rituals of our careers seem less encompassing and restrictive; when many women and men seem to be embracing new challenges and searching for greater meaning in life.

In *The Third Chapter*, the renowned sociologist Dr. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot offers a strong counterpoint to the murky ambivalence that shrouds our clear view of people in their third chapters. She challenges the still prevailing and anachronistic images of aging by documenting and revealing the ways in which the years between fifty and seventy-five may, in fact, be the most transformative and generative time in our lives, tracing the ways in which wisdom, experience, and new learning inspire individual growth and cultural transformation. The women and men whose voices fill the pages of *The Third Chapter* tell passionate and poignant stories of risk and vulnerability, failure and resilience, challenge and mastery, experimentation and improvisation, and insight and new learning.

The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk, and Adventure in the 25 Years After 50 Details

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Jon Stout says

If I'm going through it, I want to read up on it. The Third Chapter is about what people do with their lives between the ages of fifty and seventy-five. I've read similar books, such as Gail Sheehy's *Passages Predictable Crises of Adult Life* and *Understanding Men's Passages Discovering the New Map of Men's Lives*, and sometimes these books have interesting pointers and more often they describe a familiar landscape.

Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's book is determinedly upbeat and positive, emphasizes personal growth and generally avoids crises and desperate circumstances unless they are transcended. She leans towards women's experiences, which is fine, although I sometimes wonder where the men went. For example she describes a quiltmaker's project to include groups of people from all faith communities, from Muslim, Christian, Hindu, etc., from every persuasion, that is, except the male persuasion. In fairness, sixteen of her interviewees out of forty are men, and she treats them with the same engaged attention she has for the women.

The "interesting pointers" I picked up include the exercise of describing turning points of one's life in terms of "narratives," several different accounts giving alternative explanations. Thus leaving a job might be portrayed as a failing, a growing out of, a triumph or a radical departure. The narrative form helps us understand our lives as a story or as different possible stories.

Another interesting idea is that in a crisis we return to traumatic events of our childhood. Thus if I was belittled as a child by a teacher, I may replay that when I suffer a setback in later life. It seems worthwhile, for that reason, to write out some of the stories of childhood events that stick in the memory, so as to handle them more constructively as one ages.

The familiar landscape that I see is that people can do something completely different in their third quarter-centuries (just as they can any other time). It is reassuring to see that people do not have to turn into stereotyped elders as they grow older. People who are grappling with the meaning of their lives find more interesting things to do.

Towards the end of the book I came across a comment with which I resonated strongly, "I also believe that the boundaries of school need to be made more porous and permeable, that we need to reduce the generational segregation that defines life and learning in our society."

David says

Based on qualitative research involving interviews with 40 snowball-sampled baby boomers concerning their aspirations and activities in 50-75 age range. As a soon-to-be 50+ (sorry, "Third Chapter" member -- it takes on more reality as a life stage apparently if you use the expression at least once every three sentences and capitalize it every time), I found some of the career reflecting etc. of the subjects interesting. On the whole, though, it was a mostly dull book. Each chapter consisted of a theme arbitrarily grafted onto a few illustrative tales from the interviews and then wildly overgeneralized as being typical of people in this age

range.

Author has, per the jacket, won prizes for contributions to "science" and has an endowed professorship named after her, so apparently others view her work differently, but it didn't seem scientific at all to me.

Helene says

This book was a gift from a friend on my retirement. I've read a few other books on aging and life after 50. This one was positive and an interesting study of people who had made career changes later in life. They returned to their younger passions or interests and even chose a completely different path.

Though interesting, it was very scholarly and seemed written in the 'publish or perish' vein: a study interviewing 50 or so people as they made changes after 50. I did read it through, I rarely give up on a book, plus it was a gift. I was really not that interested and did not find it relevant to my life or my interests. Sorry.

Catherine says

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" I believe, then, that our contemporary preoccupation with testing, our quest for higher standards of achievement, and the tools we use for measuring and evaluating student skills and proficiency in schools lead to a narrowing and standardization of learning that neglects the building of the "edifice" of life. And I believe that the parts of the school curriculum - the arts and humanities, sports, and community service in particular- that are the first to be eliminated when school systems are facing budget cuts, may be the very arenas that support approaches to learning that will emerge as important to sustaining development across the life span. A shift to a more embracing, generous, complex curriculum, and a more "cherishing" school culture, will require changes in societal expectations, cultural priorities, and educational policies. In turn, it will require that teachers in our schools see themselves as lifelong learners, modeling for their students a curiosity about life and a fearless pursuit of new knowledge; this in turn will nourish the imagination, questioning, storytelling, intellectual discipline, and adventurousness of the students in their classroom.

Again, Mary Catherine Bateson....In the past, when people completed their matriculation through school (high school, college, graduate training, depending on time and place), they were considered to be "educated". But education can no longer be seen as finite and complete. The life cycle, she writes, "is no longer structured in terms of separation between preparation and participation. Learning is no longer before, but whenever." In order to make lifelong learning possible, then, institutions need to adapt.

Tim says

Lawrence-Lightfoot's THE THIRD CHAPTER is a qualitative sociological study of what we boomers are facing as we enter the ages of 50-75. She has interviewed 40 upper middle class, highly comfortable, and privileged men and women, and her insights are quite solid and encouraging to those of us who wish to remain vital, alert, active, and engaged - to still make a contribution both to society and to ourselves and our

learning. The book does not really talk about all the 50-75 year-olds who are struggling to get by. Nor does it ever mention a word that, to me, is key to my current joy and vocation: GRANDPARENT. Nevertheless, THE THIRD CHAPTER serves as a call for educational systems and society to engage more actively in intergenerational pursuits and to shape our educational system so that it is more long-term and multifaceted in its approach to learning.

I enjoyed the book, but I also felt that I was reading about narcissistic people who wanted it all and who were troubled by slights that they felt that had received in the work/professional/educational world and were now trying to rectify those early traumas.

I think this is a great book for our aging boomers to consider. I was most affected by the discussions of "letting go," which I had to do when I moved from my 35-year career at Manchester and Manchester-Essex HS to assume a part-time and more limited role at Waring School. But Waring, grandparenting, and AP consulting are my "Third Chapter," and I am blessed that I can continue to do what I want in much the same way that the subjects of Lawrence-Lightfoot's study can.

Tim

Clara says

This book is about an interesting subject: the ways in which people over 50 of age are finding joy and wisdom in the "Third Chapter" of their lives (the period between 50 and 75 years of age). The number of people over 50--the "Baby Boomer" generation--is significant and growing quickly, so the issue is well worth the attention Lawrence-Lightfoot gives it. The author interviews 40 Third Chapter individuals in an effort to identify what brought them to change their lives, and to learn how they're managing their transitions.

I welcomed the topic, appreciated the stories, and identified with the interior journeys of some of the interviewees, but I struggled with the author as storyteller. Lawrence-Lightfoot's descriptions are, to my ear, over-wrought. I don't debate the authenticity of the emotions conveyed by the participants; I do question the author's sentimental style. Her writing is not always so dramatic, and some of the most poignant stories resonate, but it occurs often enough that I wanted to send her to a writing teacher who would tell her to remove at least half of the adjectives and adverbs from her text.

The book's introductory and closing chapters are quite good. Here Lawrence-Lightfoot discusses Western society's negative attitudes toward aging and how to counter them through life-long learning programs and international dialogue. They serve as a good foundation for further exploration of this important topic.

Jen says

There are many good messages to take away from Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot's book about how to make a transition between careers or different stages in life. However, one flaw is that all of the people she talked to were making life changes out of their own desire, and they had the means and resources to follow their dreams. The book would have been stronger if she had reached across class boundaries a little more to find out how some of the working poor or lower middle class transition into their third act.

CarolineFromConcord says

Lawrence-Lightfoot interviews women and men between the ages of 50 and 75 who have made radical changes in their work life and avocations. Many want to make a difference in the world more now than when they were younger and more focused on gaining income and status. Others return to childhood enthusiasms like painting, drama, or music, and begin to take them very seriously -- usually for no other benefit than their own satisfaction. Lawrence-Lightfoot's concluding chapter on lifelong learning and intergenerational learning is particularly intriguing, given her background as a professor of education at Harvard. She says that laying the groundwork for life-span learning starts in the way learning is approached in kindergarten, and she calls for reforms to broaden acceptance of the different ways that individuals learn. Some of the deepest learning, for example, bears no relation to the testing that many schools are currently focusing on, she says.

Patty says

Over the years I have read several books by Lawrence-Lightfoot. Her writing always challenges me since she sees the world from a very different place than I do. I am grateful to all I have learned from this wonderful author/researcher.

The Third Chapter is the book I was looking for, but I had no idea that Lawrence-Lightfoot (or anyone else) had written it. I have been exploring what to do when I grow up since my retirement in 2013. I know that there is a path for me out there, but where it is, I am still not sure.

So I am grateful to read about other people in their third chapter of life. I found it comforting and challenging to see how other people are approaching the changes in their journeys after long careers. Looking for the next thing at 60 is very different than looking for the next career move at 30. I have a lot to think about now.

I recommend this book to anyone who has recently retired or is considering retirement. Lawrence-Lightfoot interviewed about 40 people whose experiences show the diverse paths available to those of us who are able reexamine our callings.

Marcia Johnston says

If only this author's book had been as readable as her interview with Bill Moyers (www.pbs.org/moyers/journal/08072009/w...) was inspiring. The academic-speak finally wore me down, and I stopped reading. (Here's an example: "First is the appreciation of the power of context -- the ways in which the political, historical, and cultural settings shape our perspectives and behaviors -- and second are the ways in which individuals selectively respond to these broader social and institutional forces" ... YAWN).

The people she interviews are interesting, though. I especially enjoyed the profile of Josh Carter, starting on page 178. Josh is a retired newspaper executive studying jazz piano. The things that he is learning about jazz are fascinating.

If you're between 50 and 75 or ever hope to be, skip this book -- but do watch the Bill Moyers interview.

Susan Reyna says

Wonderful series of case-studies and discussion of modern thinking regarding the third chapter of our lives. Not all situation kept my attention, but over all it was a good read.

Jorge says

A divisão da vida em capítulos (discretos) é sempre um risco embora tenha as suas vantagens. O livro equaciona os desafios que enfrentamos entre os 50 e os 75 anos se bem que o faça apenas para uma fracção dessas pessoas - as que têm meios para viver essa fase das suas vidas com relativo desafo. Embora seja esse também o meu caso, a verdade é que não me senti retratado nos casos estudados pela autora na sua qualidade de socióloga.

A parte do livro de que mais gostei foi a relativa às reflexões sobre o modelo de educação actual que privilegia o desempenho no curto prazo em vez de nos preparar para toda a vida (pag 234 Schooling and Learning). Pareceu-me que fazia sentido que o sistema de ensino adoptasse essa perspectiva o que o obrigaria a transformações profundas, conforme a autora alerta.

Ensiform says

The author, a professor of sociology at Harvard, uses forty detailed oral case studies of people – all educated, successful, and financially secure – between the ages 50 and 75 to delineate the new ways of learning such people develop. She argues that people in this age range (which she calls the “Third Chapter”) is undergoing a slow cultural reorientation, from being thought of as a time of quiet retirement and seclusion to an active, giving, creative reengagement. It is also characterized by a painful process of reexamining priorities and experiencing the tension of contradictory impulses: the need to confront old ghosts vs. the need to “give forward” to the next generation; the lettering go of formal school skills vs. the embrace of a new, collaborative, public way of learning; the desire to accomplish something with the few years left vs. the realistic acceptance that success come slowly, through failure; etc.

It's an interesting assessment; though I'm not a Third Chapter denizen yet, I found some degree of inspiration and optimism from the case studies (retirees going to work in war zones, public gardens, throwing themselves into new fields like piano and acting). I have some minor cavils, such as repeated misspellings (“peak” for “peek” – not a huge deal, but in an academic work like this, these errors erode the author's credibility). And although Lawrence-Lightfoot's authorial voice is warm and sincere, the prose is rather turgid and prolix the way such academic essays tend to be: the introduction which repeats main points given in the chapter, the conclusion which re-repeats those points; the tendency to paraphrase and quote someone (“he feels fortunate (‘truly blessed’)”... - why both?). My major objections to the argument, however, are that (a) it uses a small sample of privileged people to make generalizations about reengagement at this stage of life – which the author acknowledges; (b) it ends by advocating a massive overhaul of our cultural mores and assumptions about the elderly, our education system, and inter-generational collaboration – which is not helpful for those wishing a practical guide to reengagement; and (c) I wonder if this “new way

of learning” isn’t particular to the Third Chapter, or any age group, but anyone going through any transition, really.

Annie says

If you are heading towards age 50 and feeling the need to make drastic changes in your life direction, you may find this book inspirational. While it is academic in style (the author repeatedly has to circle back to defend her thesis, which gets tedious), it offers a number of "real-life" examples of professionals who have successfully reinvented themselves and their careers/interests later in life. The book establishes the need for an alternative social viewpoint than that of retirement years being ones of golf and leisure behind the locked gates of an age-restrictive community. Instead, society needs to foster growth, education and community interaction for individuals in this phase of life.

Jennifer says

I didn't officially finish this book, but I certainly got the gist from skimming the parts that I didn't read fully. This is very much an academic rather than a "how-to" book. It is interesting and not compelling; reminded me very much of Bateson's *Composing a Further Life*. What I did learn, which I have been hearing elsewhere, is that the creation of retirement homes, retirement communities, combined with the sometimes required retirement of 65, has created a view of people in their "third chapter" as no longer contributing to society, who just put their feet up and play golf, or who are seen as not able to contribute, or whose time is past. Lawrence-Lightfoot analyzes the whys and wherefores of this as well as following several people who have reinvented themselves in their "third" chapter, whether it is pursuing a passion from earlier years or totally trying something new.

As a total aside, it made me think of the Mrs. Pollifax mystery series, where Mrs. Pollifax, who is newly widowed and depressed and almost ready to pack it in, goes to the doctor who reminds her that she now has the freedom to do whatever she always wanted to do, which in her case was to become a spy! How many stories later, Mrs. Pollifax definitely is a good example of someone in their third chapter!
