

## CHAPTER ONE

# TRAILBLAZING

I work in a historic customshouse on Boston's waterfront. From my office, I see boats cut the harbor's currents and hear the snap of sails. A port is a transition point through which people and goods move. That makes it a good place for what I do, which is to help people navigate change by the compass of their life goals and set sail for new directions.

I founded my company, New Directions, in 1986, after years in the executive recruitment field. I wanted to try the other side of the fence—not helping companies obtain high-quality hires but helping talented individuals make career changes on their own terms. I realized that senior executives and professionals, in particular, needed to be bolder and more creative in embracing change and developing new opportunities, not merely settling for what is out there. There has not been a lot of tea or molasses passing through my building of late, but quite a few *people* have—the two thousand men and women who have come through our doors in order to chart a new course.

This work has given me an unusual vantage point on the emergence of a new life phase, which can extend anywhere from age fifty to age ninety. Americans are healthier and more vital during these years than we have ever been. More and more people are rejecting the idea of retirement as a permanent vacation and as they do resetting the once-fixed boundaries between career and retirement.

I want to share in this book the response we have created to meet this change, which I call a *life portfolio*. The central idea behind it is to step back and—using a step-by-step process—create

a balanced combination of five elements: (1) working in the form you want, (2) learning and self-development, (3) making time for personal pursuits and recreation, (4) enjoying family and friends, and (5) giving back to society. The combination of elements, or *portfolio*, is meant to reflect who you are and what you care about.

Whatever path you take during this new stage, the addition of fifteen to twenty-five years to late middle age is an extraordinary bonus. It can be a time of less stress, in which we can expand our minds and imaginations, play more, and enrich our wisdom. It can be a time of opportunity for us to give back some of what we have learned and gained. But it does not come with an owner's manual. In fact, most people are largely on their own as they enter it.

Throughout their careers, they received plenty of advice on how to save for retirement and what to do with their money. But in my view, they received too little advice, education, and training about how to rebalance their greatest assets: their time, their energy, and their gifts. In addition to having no clear guidelines, people who are age fifty and above were generally not taught as they grew up to think of this time as a period of personal growth. It's hardly surprising, then, that many of them feel off-kilter or in need of direction as they enter this new chapter in their lives.

Helping people in that situation move forward is one of two purposes I have in writing this book. With traditional retirement no longer a serious or viable postcareer option, I want to show readers how to build the creative alternative of a life portfolio, which rests on a balance of integrated elements. Drawing on years of experience, I will share the ideas behind it as well as strategies and practical steps that have proven to be effective.

What does the process look like? I believe that the first step in exploiting new possibilities is challenging your mind-set about the notion of "retirement." Take the time to investigate your assumptions or to "surface" any subconscious expectations about it. Talking with others is a good way to do this. Thoughts that you did not fully realize you had may tumble out. Be willing to learn and change your attitude. Why? Because how we think shapes our destiny. Our inward attitudes and assumptions contribute strongly to our outward reality. Also, be bold about reframing the potential vistas before you. We need to move beyond tinkering with retirement by adding more physical exercise or hiring retirees to work

in retail chain stores, as welcome as those initial steps are. What I mean is that merely resolving to walk the course instead of taking the cart is not going to put you in a new frame of mind.

The second step is to revise the time line you have of your life. All of us need to plan for the likelihood that we may not fully retire until far later than we had ever imagined—or maybe never. Individuals vary, of course, but increasingly this means our eighties and nineties. I've been astonished by the number of people I have met or heard about who are working, active, and vital during those ninth and tenth decades of life. They are also the ones most likely to be perplexed by the word *retirement*.

This is all so relatively new that it still catches me off guard, and I bet it does so for you as well. Jeff Taylor is the founder of the Internet job site Monster.com. Recently, he started a new Internet-based company aimed at Web-surfing older Americans. A reporter asked him about his business plan. "I'm going to target the fifty- to hundred-year-old market," he said. Was this hyperbole? Possibly, but the mere fact that Taylor could speculate about the existence of such a consumer market and be taken seriously shows how much things have changed. We are in it for the long haul.

A third critical step is to recognize and embrace the larger personal opportunity or goal in this new stage of life. I have come to think that in order to have a successful postcareer life, one must grapple with an existential question: How do I go about discovering and experiencing what makes me happy, what gives me fulfillment and a sense of purpose? This means finding what creates, for each of us, the beginnings of a personal legacy. I believe that how well you live past age fifty depends in part on your rediscovering your unique gifts and purpose in life and then building a plan around developing them and executing that plan.

## WIDER BENEFITS

My other main purpose in these pages is broader. For lack of forethought and creativity, our social institutions and corporate culture remain oriented—by default—toward a style of retirement in which people feel useless and adrift. Yet if we can adapt our thinking as a society to the new realities, there will be benefits for everyone. The "golden years" style of retirement was predicated on the assumption

that aging equaled decline. Research has shown this assumption to be self-fulfilling. No wonder that half of full-time retirees say they are bored! I speak before groups of retired people. Listeners often approach me afterward to say how hard it has been to live without a purpose beyond lowering handicaps or monitoring the pool temperature.

Even with the recent shift to more active models, however, retirement in America remains a waste of what Marc Freedman, the founder and president of the nonprofit organization Civic Ventures, calls our nation's "enormous untapped resource"—the skills, experience, and wisdom of tens of millions of older Americans. This collective social capital is, to continue the metaphor, like a vein of gold in the ground that we refuse to mine and spend on good purposes.

Let's engage companies, universities, and public and religious institutions in generating new ways of thinking about the win-win opportunities that extended middle age affords. Let's make it more possible for those privileged enough to live a life portfolio to form partnerships with those who are not. Let's create excitement and curiosity around the idea that what follows a career is not retirement but a new perspective on life, characterized by experimentation, growth, giving back, and fulfillment.

One hurdle still to be overcome is what to call this new perspective, this stage that people in their fifties, sixties, seventies, and eighties are passing through. Most terms for it emphasize its relation to aging—*the third age*, *the second act*, and the many variations on retirement, including *unretirement*, *anti-retirement*, *revolving retirement*, *rewirement*, and *rehirement*. I call it *portfolio*, after the Life Portfolio Program™ we developed and launched at New Directions in 1994. A portfolio is, literally, a balanced collection of holdings related to one person, such as financial assets, job responsibilities, artistic works, and accomplishments. It's something portable, something you carry with you. The portfolio represents the whole. It represents what you have or have done as an expression of who you are. As work and life change, we take some elements out and put others in, which is just what we do when we reallocate or rebalance our investment portfolios.

It is true that, practically speaking, we may not take the portfolio approach or pursue a portfolio lifestyle until we have worked

enough years or gained flexibility on the need to make money. But I also believe that there is a portfolio perspective or mind-set that we may enter into at any age. It's a lifelong way of looking at your career integrated into the rest of your life. Although I like *prime time* and sometimes use it, I feel that the term *portfolio* has advantages over the age- or stage-related terms. It speaks to what people are *doing* with their lives, how they are living, and what they value—not their age or stage of life. And portfolio, as I said, expands into a mind-set that is ageless, in the broader sense of figuring out what really matters in life.

## FROM LIMBO TO LEGACY

The portfolio way of thinking about late middle age is still fairly new. For decades, Americans retired after sixty, with too many of them entering a period of inactivity. The hope of spending leisure time at the golf course, pool, or shopping mall was well marketed and widely shared, even if it masked a reality of boredom and depression. Not that retirees could go back if they wanted to. They would clean out the desk, go to the retirement party, and—upon leaving the office for the last time—hear a figurative loud click as if exiting a one-way door.

This approach has not completely faded. Senior-level executives and professionals still come to me after trying it. “I flunked retirement,” one former CEO told me. I point out that in fact their vision of retirement “failed” them.

Yet there is a whole new life zone between career and complete retirement, one that seems to get wider every day. In this zone, new forms of paid and unpaid work, pursuits and possibilities, are becoming available. But it has been a do-it-yourself revolution to this point. Needed opportunities are not being created fast enough by companies or government programs. Progress *is* being made by those acting entrepreneurially between fifty and whenever who feel too young or energetic to retire yet who feel tired of work that no longer enriches their lives.

Older people who choose to pursue a second or third vocation are also increasingly physically able to do so. People may continue working at a reduced pace until age eighty-five and beyond. Their reasons are diverse. One is the need for income. Pension plans are

no longer reliable, and Social Security benefits down the road are at risk. Investment portfolios took a hit after the dot-com bubble burst. The combination of much higher medical costs and longer life spans has made a long, fixed-income retirement prohibitively expensive for many people.

But there is also something else going on, which reflects a major theme of this book. It's a kind of revolt against the prospect of coasting through retirement. Many people in the zone between total career mode and total retirement want to discover or rediscover their passion. They would rather begin to create a legacy than to be in limbo. Even those who don't have to work to earn income want to work in order to turn careers into callings, success into significance.

They want to be active and contribute, start businesses, and be mentors and community leaders. They want to learn and create, paint and teach, earn black belts, write musicals, and invent better ways to do things. They are becoming entrepreneurs, going back to school, and using their experience to advise or create nonprofits and foundations. Instead of wanting to get ahead, they want to make a difference. Like good visionaries, they looked at the models handed to them—trudging along in golden chains or whiling away retirement in trivial pursuits—and decided they could do better.

I heard about a woman who captured this change eloquently not long ago. The speaker was Nancy Bailey Miller, a poet and teacher who helped run the chapel at Phillips Academy, in Andover, Massachusetts, where she delivered a sermon.

At fifty-two, I still ask myself what I will be when I grow up. I have had many careers: middle school and high school English teacher, mother, Suzuki violin teacher, grant writer, poet, administrative worker in nonprofit, and now office manager here at Cochran Chapel. Does this mosaic comprise a sequence of jobs over thirty years or a "calling"? And now that our children are living away from home, which door is opening? Which threshold needs crossing? What am I supposed to be doing with my life? A job no longer defines who I am. Rather, who I am seems to be defining the jobs I do.

Jobs may have once defined who we were. Now, in the portfolio perspective, it's we who define the jobs we do. I believe that people

## “Pruning” Oneself in Portfolio

There is no one right way to create a fulfilling alternative to retirement. Those who manage to do so, however, tend not to rush into a plan in order to fill a void. They slow down and take the time to assess their lives and their goals, during which they often look for ways to apply in a new way something they have done well in the past. The key is listening to themselves and to others and using intuition and instinct to identify what feels right. A former client who did just that and who agreed to share his story is Hank Schmelzer. Hank is the president of the Maine Community Foundation. How he got there is an example of how meaningful lives after fifty are created.

Hank began his work in philanthropy in 2000, at age fifty-seven and after thirty years in financial services. As the president and CEO of a Boston-based mutual fund company, he managed \$8 billion and supervised 240 people. When he turned fifty, Hank set a goal of starting a new career in a different field within five years. When his fifty-fifth birthday came, he knew he had to try something different; he just didn't know what. At the time, the idea of walking away from his top-dog salary and perks, he told me, was “gut-wrenching.” External events intervened. A corporate reorganization in 1998 gave him an opening: he took it and left. Hank became one of our clients at New Directions that year.

Hank took the time to decompress and conduct a thorough assessment before jumping on the next train at the station. William Bridges (2004), author of the book *Transitions*, calls this going into *neutral*, a term we frequently use at New Directions. Hank and his wife traveled to Italy, where for several months he skied every morning and studied Italian and wrote every afternoon. “Ideas kept coming to me,” Hank told me. “For the first time, I was free to create. I loved skiing every day, studying Italian and writing every day. I began to clear away what felt insignificant.” He later did a research project on government regulation of hedge funds through Harvard's Kennedy School of Government.

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Hank said that as he sought his new path, he had to develop a deeper knowledge about what was most important to him, what fed his core self. We sometimes glibly call the assessment process “Me 101.” On the surface, this sounds selfish. But in fact, people who truly know themselves tend to make life choices that give them the will and ability to help others. I believe deeply in serving others and changing our world for the better. Nevertheless, I tell this to clients who want to do just that: don’t ask yourself what the world needs. Ask what makes you come alive and go do that, because what the world needs are people who have come alive.

I also advise clients in the assessment process to follow hints from their own histories. Hank did this and along the way found a great metaphor for career change. He had loved apple trees since growing up in a rural community outside Boston. His father had apple trees, and Hank worked in several orchards. So he decided to take a course on how to revitalize an apple tree.

“It was all about pruning the dead wood,” he said, “about gradually getting rid of the weak branches and suckers and laterals that overlap each other. When you cut out the weak branches at the center of the tree, you make it a strong, healthy tree that holds the heavy fruit.” Hank learned that an overcrowded apple tree is hard to protect from disease and produces small, dull apples. The older an apple tree grows, the heavier a pruning it needs.

“The teacher was this old Maine duffer named Amos. Someone asked how you know when you’ve pruned enough. Amos thought for a minute. Then he said, ‘Well, stand back and look. If you think you can pick up your cat and toss him right through the middle, then you’ve pruned enough.’

“I loved that response, because it reminds me of what you have to do when you’re going through career change. You have to try to open yourself up and get rid of all the dead aspects of yourself that weigh you down or drain the nutrients



from your mind and soul. It's self-pruning, and it's what you have to do to rejuvenate and be able to grow productively."

In late 1999, a year after he had left his job, Hank heard about an opening at the Maine Community Foundation, which is based in Ellsworth, Maine, and which funds state projects in education, conservation and the environment, the arts, and social services. Hank said the job interested him for several reasons. He was trained as a lawyer, and through his years in the securities world, he had always remained interested in doing something connected to public service. In addition, he had resolved during self-assessment to seek a role that would tap into and build on his years of experience, and he discovered that the nonprofit world could benefit from his financial and managerial skills.

Plus he had Maine in his blood. His grandfather had been a minister in Maine. His mother had grown up there. And Hank had vacationed there as a child, graduated from the University of Maine, and now owned a second home there. "Every day after I learned about the job, it just got more and more interesting and engaging," he said.

Hank took the job in 2000. The change took some adjusting, he recalls, because the nonprofit world, which prizes consensus, is a different animal from the hard-driving corporate culture he came from. "I knew my skills were valued, but it took awhile for people to accept me and for me to feel comfortable in that culture." But it worked. Since he took over, the endowment of the Maine Community Foundation has more than doubled, from \$78 million to \$180 million, permitting it to make more grants and help more people. Today he calls his new job "just about perfect" for him. The knot he used to have in his gut Sunday nights, thinking about the coming week, has vanished, and he says he loves getting up each day and going to work. "We're trying to make life better," he explains. And he gets an occasional bonus that he truly values: Hank has traded his Blackberry pager for visits in his jeep on bumpy back roads to blueberry farmers in Maine.

who do this during extended middle age have come to recognize and accept that their chance to be happy, to be fully who they are meant to be on this earth, is now. This comes at different times to each of us. Sadly, some never realize it. I urge those just awakening to this feeling to persevere. Keep this fire burning, and as you plan for the future, don't let the concept of passive retirement even creep into your thinking. You may not do all you hope, but cultivating the ability to imagine the possibilities in front of you is the first step.

## RECLAIMING OURSELVES

I mentioned earlier that building New Directions has been a great vantage point from which to observe the emergence of this new perspective on later life. I'd like to tell you some of the broad lessons I have learned to set a context for my discussion of portfolio. One is how many clients have been willing to help others, even as they seek help planning their own careers and lives. Years ago, I started a foundation to put the managerial skills and experience of our clients to work helping low-income people find employment. So far, some 450-plus clients have volunteered as job mentors. Many of them may not have known it inside, but they were simply waiting to be asked. A surprise lesson has been how often our alumni, as we call them, have compared their time of transition with us with going back to school to get recharged—except that, in this case, they “majored” in their own lives.

I have also learned that senior executives who are able to revitalize a company, shift its strategic focus, or adapt its offerings may not be able to do that for themselves. We have had clients who could manage huge, multinational corporations but hit stumbling blocks managing their own lives.

The most striking surprise, however, has been how much the process of career change entails a more subjective, interior, and even spiritual process: nothing less than the rediscovery and reclaiming of our unique spark as individuals. When people lose or surrender a job, they have to learn to stop identifying themselves by their title, company, or industry. They have to discover or rediscover the deeper identity, which probably should have been their ground, their foundation, all the way along.

I've found that a wide-ranging and serious process of assessment can enable them to revise and deepen their understanding of the specific skills, areas of insight, motivations, or experiential wisdom that each of us has to offer—as well as how to hone them for new uses. It means coming to know our individual distinctive gifts, the “light” within ourselves that we should never hide.

Not everyone can do this. There are many emotional obstacles, which I will address. But for those who can, the rewards are manifold. At New Directions, we take as our mission statement a remarkable thought from the philosopher Martin Buber:

Every person born in this world represents something new, something that never existed before, something original and unique and every man's foremost task is the actualization of his unique, unprecedented and never-recurring possibilities [1960, pp. 12–13].

I truly believe Buber when he says that everybody has something unique to offer. It's become my mission and my privilege to help people get in touch with it, to identify the work or activity that capitalizes on and leverages their assets and skills. The life window of portfolio time is our chance to *actualize* these gifts.

Of course, no one likes to surrender familiar ways of thinking or doing in order to reinvent him or herself. Psychologist Erich Fromm called the process that Buber describes as “giving birth” to oneself, but he also observes that some people never do it. “We should be fully born when we die,” he wrote. But too many people, he added, “die before they are born.”

For all the difficulty, however, this is a good news story. That good news is that we have the gift of these extra years and that they are full of possibilities. To seize them, you have to become an entrepreneur of your own life. *Develop them*. People who think like that do better as they go from careers to life portfolios. They figure things out, not *by* themselves necessarily, but *for* themselves. Disappointments, rejections, losses—all are opportunities. No does not mean never. Everything is negotiable. They ask, “What if?” They are looking for better ways. They make choices. Maybe they are wrong at first, but they jump in. They become players, not spectators, in the game of life.

If you can direct that kind of curiosity *inward*, you will discover the values, interests, and abilities at your core, at the nut and fiber of who you are. Those qualities, once identified, can be applied to opportunities and communicated to others in ways as exciting as the business plan of any start-up.

I sometimes struggle with this because it may sound selfish. But if this kind of self-actualization makes us stronger and thus more able to give back to others, and I believe that it does, then why shouldn't we speak of it with boldness and conviction? It's usually people in touch with their passions who are on the front lines of volunteering. "If you want to lift yourself up," said Booker T. Washington, "lift up someone else." It's just as true that if you lift up yourself, you are more likely to lift up someone else.

So dream anything, even if it seems frivolous. "Those who dream by day," Edgar Allan Poe wrote in his short story "Eleonora" in 1842, see things that "escape those who dream only by night." Challenge tradition. Look at the transition to extended middle age as not another career change, but a life change. If you are fifty-five, it could be thirty years or longer before you are ready to stop work completely.

My message is not just for those in extended middle age. To those who are younger, perhaps still building a career, I say to you, *plan for it!* No one should be caught flat-footed by the lengthening of middle age. Life portfolios don't appear full bloomed out of thin air after decades spent relentlessly focused on careers. Ideally, they are woven continually in the back of our minds throughout our careers, during the valleys but also the peaks. Approached in this spirit, portfolio becomes an ongoing, ageless framework for self-renewal.

If you are younger, don't let the recent gains in longevity provide an excuse to delay thinking about what you will do. It's human nature for people to say that aging begins from ten to twenty years *later* than their current age. It actually starts on a physical and mental level before we know it, with changes in cognitive function and flexibility perceptible in one's late thirties and forties, according to Joseph Coughlin, the founder and director of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's AgeLab. "Aging comes sooner than we'd like," he says. Moreover, the warp speed at which knowledge and

technology are moving, he adds, puts everyone, including people under age forty, at risk of not adapting to new realities quickly enough. I know Joe because I sit on the advisory board of the AgeLab. One of its basic messages is that aging is becoming less a chronological state and more a state of mind.

This leads me to some advice that you probably would not hear at MIT but which has served me well: it wasn't raining when Noah built the ark. Plan! Anticipate. Do the homework. Assess and reassess your assets, skills, gifts, and goals all along the way. Know your own callings, energies, and passions. Extend your support networks or create new ones, and make doing these things your agenda day after day after day, even if it competes with another full-time job before prime time sets in. That is a risk that must be taken.

If the beginnings of plans are made and the seeds of future activities are sown in advance, then when change comes, we don't have to go back to square one, asking ourselves, what am I going to do? A new pursuit in line with your true self will be at least a little closer; the networks we need to generate new opportunities will be more advanced. For people in the midst of their careers, this requires maintaining a sense of life goals on a track above corporate or job goals. That might have sounded self-serving not long ago, but today it's a realistic response to the immense change in the modern workplace. So develop the habit of introspection and the entrepreneurial mind-set described in this book. You'll need them when your career is no longer the centerpiece of your life.