

Shifting Strengths for Success in the Second Half of Life

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*What is a Normal goal to a young person
becomes a neurotic hindrance in old age.*

--Carl Jung

Excerpts from Brooks, A. C. (2022). *From Strength to Strength: Finding Success, Happiness, and Deep Purpose in the Second Half of Life*.

Our questions of the day: How does our personality type help or hinder our shifting from fluid intelligence to crystalized intelligence? Do some types struggle more than others? Does this framing of the strengths of the “third half of life” speak more to some types than others? We will discuss these in Fe, Fi, Te, and Ti groups.

[Cattell wrote] *Structure, Growth, and Action*. In it, he posited that there were two types of intelligence that people possess, but at greater abundance at different points in life. The first is fluid intelligence, which Cattell defined as the ability to reason, think flexibly, and solve novel problems. It is what we commonly think of as raw smarts, and researchers find that it is associated with both reading and mathematical ability. Innovators typically have an abundance of fluid intelligence. Cattell, who specialized in intelligence testing, observed that it was highest relatively early in adulthood and diminished rapidly starting in one’s thirties and forties.⁷ (p. 25)

...Crystallized intelligence. This is defined as the ability to use a stock of knowledge learned in the past. Crystallized intelligence, relying as it does on a stock of knowledge, tends to increase with age through one’s forties, fifties, and sixties—and does not diminish until quite late in life, if at all. Cattell himself described the two intelligences in this way: “[Fluid intelligence] is conceptualized as the decontextualized ability to solve abstract problems, while crystallized intelligence represents a person’s knowledge gained during life by acculturation and learning.”⁸ Translation: When you are young, you have raw smarts; when you are old, you have wisdom. When you are young, you can generate lots of facts; when you are old, you know what they mean and how to use them...It says that if your career relies solely on fluid intelligence, it’s true that you will peak and decline pretty early. But if your career requires crystallized intelligence—or if you can repurpose your professional life to rely more on crystallized intelligence—your peak will come later but your decline will happen much, much later, if ever. And if you can go from one type to the other—well, then you have cracked the code. (p.27)

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What I found was a hidden source of anguish that wasn’t just widespread but nearly universal among people who have done well in their careers. I came to call this the “striver’s curse”: people who strive to be excellent at what they do often wind up finding their inevitable decline terrifying, their successes increasingly unsatisfying, and their relationships lacking.

...The good news is that I also discovered what I was looking for: a way to escape the curse. Methodically, I built a strategic plan for the rest of my life, giving me the chance to have a second half of adulthood that is not only not disappointing but happier and more meaningful than the first. (p. xiv)

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Here is the reality: in practically every high-skill profession, decline sets in sometime between one's late thirties and early fifties. Sorry, I know that stings. And it gets worse: the more accomplished one is at the peak of one's career, the more pronounced decline seems once it has set in. (p. 4)

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They found that peak performance is occurring at later ages than in the past, principally because the knowledge required to do cutting-edge work has increased so much over the decades. Still, since 1985, the peak age is not old: for physicists, fifty; for chemistry, forty-six; and for medicine, forty-five. After that, innovation drops precipitously. Other knowledge fields follow the same basic pattern. For writers, decline sets in between about forty and fifty-five.¹ Financial professionals reach peak performance between the ages of thirty-six and forty.² Or take doctors: they appear to peak in their thirties, with steep drop-offs in skill as the years pass.³ (p. 6)

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In fact, older adults can enhance their cognitive effectiveness precisely by taking their own advice: turn off the phone and music and go someplace completely quiet to think and work.⁴ (p. 14)

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In 2007, a team of academic researchers at the University of California, Los Angeles, and Princeton University analyzed data on more than a thousand elderly people. Their findings, published in the Journal of Gerontology, showed that senior citizens who never or rarely "felt useful" were nearly three times as likely as those who frequently felt useful to develop a mild disability and more than three times as likely to have died during the course of the study. (p. 18)

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The decline problem is a double whammy, then: we need ever-greater success to avoid dissatisfaction, yet our abilities to stay even are declining. No, it's actually a triple whammy, because as we try to stay even, we wind up in patterns of addictive behavior such as workaholism, which puts strivers into unhealthy relationship patterns at the cost of deep connection to spouses, children, and friends. By the time the wipeout occurs, there's no one there to help us get up and dust off. No one feels sorry for a successful person. The suffering of a striver with a comfortable life invokes the image of the world's smallest violin. (p. 21)

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Here is the bottom line, fellow striver: when it comes to the enviable skills that you worked so hard to attain and that made you successful in your field, you can expect significant decline to come as soon as your thirties, or as late as your early fifties. That's the deal, and it's not fun. Sorry. So what are you going to do about it? There are really only three doors you can go through here:

1. You can deny the facts and rage against decline—setting yourself up for frustration and disappointment.
2. You can shrug and give in to decline— and experience your aging as an unavoidable tragedy.
3. You can accept that what got you to this point won't work to get you into the future—that you need to build some new strengths and skills. (p. 22)

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People maintain and grow their vocabulary—in their native languages and foreign languages—all the way to the end of life.⁵ Similarly, you may notice that with age, people are better at combining and utilizing complex ideas.⁶ (p. 24)

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Almost without fail, you will notice the decline in the fluid intelligence portion. However, there always exists the ability to redesign your career less on innovation and more on instruction as the years pass, thus playing to your strengths with age. (p. 28)

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A recent study in The Chronicle of Higher Education showed that the oldest college professors tended to have the best teaching evaluations within departments. They found this especially in the humanities, where professors got their lowest ratings early in their careers and improved through their sixties and seventies. (A note to college students reading this book: enroll in the classes of the oldest professors.) (p. 29)

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So why do people try, over and over again? Two reasons: First, they are not aware that their first curve naturally bends down—they think something is wrong with them. And second, they don't know that another curve exists that will take them to a new kind of success. P. 33

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Devote the back half of your life to serving others with your wisdom. Get old sharing the things you believe are most important. Excellence is always its own reward, and this is how you can be most excellent as you age. The rest of this book, therefore, is dedicated to helping you make the jump. First, I will show you the three forces holding you back, and how to remove them. They are your addiction to work and success, your attachment to worldly rewards, and your fear of decline. Then I'll show you the three things you need to do starting right now to make the second curve better than the first: develop your relationships, start your spiritual journey,

and embrace your weaknesses. Finally, I'll tell you what you can expect to feel as you start your transition. (p.40-41)

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However, I have met a lot of people who cross over into workaholism, and I am guilty of this myself. Here are, in my opinion, better questions:

1. Do you fail to reserve part of your energy for your loved ones after work and stop working only when you are a desiccated husk of a human being?
2. Do you sneak around to work? For example, when your spouse leaves the house on a Sunday, do you immediately turn to work and then put it away before she or he returns so that it is not apparent what you were doing?
3. Does it make you anxious and unhappy when someone—such as your spouse—suggests you take time away from work for activities with loved ones, even when nothing in your work is unusually pressing? (By the way, I'm feeling a bit angry and defensive as I write this.) (p. 40)

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Economists consistently find that our marginal productivity tanks with work hours beyond eight or ten per day.⁹ (p. 49)

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In the 1980s, physician Robert Goldman famously found in his research that half of aspiring athletes would be willing to accept certain death in five years in exchange for an Olympic gold medal today.¹¹ (p. 52)

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It is often believed that President Teddy Roosevelt called social comparison the “thief of joy.” Whether he said it or not, it's true. (p. 59)

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1. Do you define your self-worth in terms of your job title or professional position?
2. Do you quantify your own success in terms of money, power, or prestige?
3. Do you fail to see clearly—or are you uncomfortable with—what comes after your last professional successes?
4. Is your “retirement plan” to go on and on without stopping?
5. Do you dream about being remembered for your professional successes?

If you answered affirmatively to one of these questions, you are probably a success addict. (p. 60)

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If you want to be happy, you have to state your honest aspiration to be happy, to be willing to be a little less special in worldly terms, and thus to stop objectifying yourself. You must state your desire to lighten your load with pride's opposing virtue: humility. (p. 61)

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Meanwhile, most Eastern philosophy warns that this acquisitiveness leads to materialism and vanity, which derails the search for happiness by obscuring one's essential nature. ...We need to chip away the jade boulder of our lives until we find ourselves. As we age, we shouldn't accumulate more to represent ourselves but rather strip things away to find our true selves—and thus, to find our second curve. (p. 67)

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In [Thomas's] view, people who opt for the worldly path choose "substitutes for God": idols that objectify the idolater and never satisfy the craving for happiness.¹¹ Even if you are not a religious believer, his list rings true as the idols that attract us. They are money, power, pleasure, and honor...I have a party game I like to call "What's My Idol?" Here's how it works: rank Thomas's four attachments with respect to how much control they have over you, starting at the bottom with what attracts you the least. (p. 71)

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Over the next several days, the truth emerged to Siddhartha—that release from suffering comes not from renunciation of the things of the world, but from release from attachment to those things. A Middle Way shunned both ascetic extremism and sensuous indulgence, because both are attachments and thus lead to dissatisfaction. (p. 74)

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I have learned through my worldly success to search for satisfaction in the world's rewards, which are ultimately not satisfying. I will suffer with dissatisfaction when I attain these rewards if I am attached to them and suffer even more when I no longer earn them. The only solution to this problem is to shed my attachments and redefine my desires. To do so is my path to enlightenment—and my second curve. (p. 75)

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When you get an emotional shock—good or bad—your brain wants to re-equilibrate, making it hard to stay on the high or low for very long. This is especially true for positive emotions, which makes evolutionary sense for survival. The joy that came to your caveman ancestor from finding a sweet berry on a bush couldn't occupy him for very long, lest he be distracted from the threat of the tiger, for whom your ancestor would make a nice lunch. (p. 78)

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We all know perfectly well that social comparison is ridiculous and harmful...Scholars show that participating in "keeping up with the Joneses" creates anxiety and even depression.¹² In experiments using human subjects solving puzzles, the unhappiest people were consistently those paying the most attention to how they performed relative to other subjects.¹³ (p. 81)

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[Society says] Satisfaction = Continually getting what you want Success = Continually having more than others Failure = Having less. Dissatisfaction is the malady that makes us chase our

worldly rewards to ever-greater heights. The futility of attaining satisfaction is one of the reasons that professional decline is so painful: Desperate to achieve enough to be satisfied, we find that instead we are going backward. We are slowly falling off the back of the hedonic treadmill. (p. 85)

Satisfaction = What you have ÷ what you want (p. 86)

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In the words of the Spanish Catholic saint Josemaría Escrivá, “He has most who needs least. Don’t create needs for yourself.”¹⁴ (p. 19)

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The bestselling author and speaker Simon Sinek always gives people in search of true success in work and life the advice that they need to find their why.¹⁵ That is, he tells them that to unlock their true potential and happiness, they need to articulate their deep purpose in life and shed the activities that are not in service of that purpose. Your why is the sculpture inside the block of jade. (p. 87)

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Researchers have consistently found that most survivors of illness and loss experience post-traumatic growth. Indeed, cancer survivors tend to report higher happiness levels than demographically matched people who did not have cancer.¹⁶ (p. 89)

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“In just six months I went from ‘Who’s Who’ to ‘Who’s He?’ ” (p. 101)

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According to Leo Tolstoy, “The worst thing about death is the fact that when a man is dead it is impossible any longer to undo the harm you have done him, or to do the good you haven’t done him. They say: live in such a way as to be always ready to die. I would say: live in such a way that anyone can die without you having anything to regret.” (p. 104)

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The secret to bearing my decline—no, enjoying it—is to be more conscious of the roots linking me to others. Further, my connection to others makes my jump to the second curve all the more natural and normal. Indeed, the crystallized intelligence curve is predicated on interconnectedness. Without it, my wisdom has no outlet. (p. 113)

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According to George Vaillant, the single most important trait of Happy-Well elders is healthy relationships. As he puts it, “Happiness is love. Full stop.”¹⁷ (p. 118)

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The theologian and philosopher Paul Tillich put it like this in his classic book *The Eternal Now*: “Solitude expresses the glory of being alone, whereas loneliness expresses the pain of feeling alone.”¹⁸ (p. 118)

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Work friendships are so important that 70 percent of people say friendship at work is the most important element to a happy work life, and 58 percent say they would turn down a higher-paying job if it meant not getting along with coworkers.¹⁸ (p. 122)

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You need strong human connections to help you get on the second curve and flourish. No matter how introverted you are, you cannot expect to thrive into old age without healthy, intimate relationships.

- For married people, a loving, companionate spousal relationship is key to thriving.
- Marriage and family are not an adequate substitute for close friendships, which should not be left up to chance.
- Friendship is a skill that requires practice, time, and commitment.
- Work friendships are not a substitute for real friendships, although they can also be satisfying, if designed purposively. (p. 133)

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The first ashrama is brahmacharya, the period of youth and young adulthood dedicated to learning. The second is grihastha, when a person builds a career, accumulates wealth, and maintains a family. This second stage seems fairly straightforward and uncontroversial, but in this stage the Hindu philosophers find one of life's most common traps: People become attached to its earthly rewards—money, power, sex, prestige—and thus try to make this stage last a lifetime. Sound familiar? This is another description of being stuck on the fluid intelligence curve, chasing Aquinas's four idols—money, power, pleasure, and honor—that lead to self-objectification, but that never satisfy. To break the attachment to these idols requires movement to a new stage of life, with a new set of skills—spiritual skills. The change can be painful, Acharya said, like becoming an adult for a second time. And it means letting go of things that defined us in the eyes of the world. In other words, we have to move beyond the worldly rewards to experience transition and find wisdom in a new ashrama—and so defeat the scourge of attachments. That ordinarily occurs, if we are diligent, around age fifty. And that new stage? It is called vanaprastha, which comes from two Sanskrit words meaning “retiring” and “into the forest.” This is the stage at which we purposively begin to pull back from our old personal and professional duties, becoming more and more devoted to spirituality and deep wisdom, crystallized intelligence, teaching, and faith. It does not mean the perfect life requires retiring at age fifty into a forest; rather, that one's life goals must readjust. Vanaprastha is the metaphysical context of the second curve. But vanaprastha isn't the last stop, Acharya told me. That would be sannyasa, the last spiritual stage that comes in old age. This is the stage totally dedicated to the fruits of enlightenment. In times past, some Hindu men would literally leave their families around age seventy-five, take holy vows, and spend the rest of their lives at the feet of masters (p. 145)

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There are four learning steps in becoming a “modern elder”: evolve from a fixed to a growth mindset, learn openness to new things, collaborate with teams, and counsel others. (p. 203)

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They created what they called the “Work Passion Pursuit Questionnaire,” comparing the job satisfaction of people whose primary work goal was enjoyment with those whose primary goal was finding meaning in their work.²¹ Across 1,357 people in their sample, the researchers found that enjoyment seekers had less passion for their work and changed jobs more frequently than meaning seekers. This is just an example of the age-old debate over two kinds of happiness that scholars refer to as hedonia and eudaimonia. Hedonia is about feeling good; eudaimonia is about living a purpose-filled life. In truth, we need both. Hedonia without eudaimonia devolves into empty pleasure; eudaimonia without hedonia can become dry. At the nexus of enjoyable and meaningful is interesting. Interest is considered by many neuroscientists to be a positive primary emotion, processed in the limbic system of the brain.²² Something that truly interests you is intensely pleasurable; it also must have meaning in order to hold your interest. Thus, “Is this work deeply interesting to me?” is a helpful litmus test of whether a new activity is your new marshmallow. (p. 208)

Notes

1. Bowman, James. (2013). “Herb Stein’s Law.” *The New Criterion*, 31(5), 1.
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3. Korniotis, George M., and Kumar, Alok. (2011). “Do Older Investors Make Better Investment Decisions?” *The Review of Economics and Statistics*, 93(1), 244–65.
4. Tessler, M., Shrier, I., and Steele, R. (2012). “Association Between Anesthesiologist Age and Litigation.” *Anesthesiology*, 116(3), 574–79. As doctors have succeeded in keeping us alive longer, they’ve also kept themselves alive—and practicing clinically—longer. The *Journal of the American Medical Association* has shown a 374 percent increase in physicians sixty-five or older, from 1975 to 2013. See Dellinger, E., Pellegrini, C., and Gallagher, T. (2017). “The Aging Physician and the Medical Profession: A Review.” *JAMA Surgery*, 152(10), 967–71.
5. Keuleers, Emmanuel, Stevens, Michaël, Mandera, Paweł, and Brysbaert, Marc. (2015). “Word Knowledge in the Crowd: Measuring Vocabulary Size and Word Prevalence in a Massive Online Experiment.” *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*, 68(8), 1665–92.
6. 1 Hartshorne, Joshua K., and Germine, Laura T. (2015). “When Does Cognitive Functioning Peak? The Asynchronous Rise and Fall of Different Cognitive Abilities Across the Life Span.” *Psychological Science*, 26(4), 433–43; Vaci, N., Cocić, D., Gula, B., and Bilalić, M. (2019). “Large Data and Bayesian Modeling-Aging Curves of NBA Players.” *Behavior Research Methods*, 51(4), 1544–64.
7. Some say Raymond Cattell didn’t actually invent the theory but that the real credit belongs to Donald Hebb. According to Richard Brown, “Cattell’s theory of fluid and crystallized intelligence is Hebb’s theory on Intelligence A and Intelligence B, given another name and

popularized by Cattell. Cattell's theory was Hebb's idea." The two men actually corresponded and bickered over who deserved the credit. See Brown, Richard E. (2016). "Hebb and Cattell: The Genesis of the Theory of Fluid and Crystallized Intelligence." *Frontiers in Human Neuroscience*, 10(2016), 606.

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10. Goldman, B., Bush, P., and Klatz, R. (1984). *Death in the Locker Room: Steroids and Sports*. South Bend, IN: Icarus Press. The theologian and Catholic bishop Robert Barron is most responsible for this formulation of Thomas's teaching.
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12. Swallow, S., and Kuiper, N. (1988). "Social Comparison and Negative Self-Evaluations: An Application to Depression." *Clinical Psychology Review*, 8(1), 55–76.
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