

Opinion: How winning \$10 million would change your life — and other insights into aging

Published: Sept. 2, 2021

By Joe Kesler

Finding purpose in the second half of life



Getty Images

Growing up, I was heavily influenced by the ideals of the Protestant [work ethic](#). Working hard and finding career success provided great satisfaction, so I assumed I'd handle the second half of my life in the same way as the first.

This wasn't a great plan.

I was around age 50 when I came across the writings of psychiatrist Carl Jung and his discussion of the two halves of life. For me, the timing couldn't have been better. Jung saw that, in the second half of life, it's no longer enough to find meaning in success. He knew, as we age, we find purpose in different ways than in life's first half.

Jung summed it up poetically: "One cannot live the afternoon of life according to the program of life's morning; for what was great in the morning will be of little importance in the evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening become a lie." Jung opened my eyes to seeing our 50s to our 80s as a season of life when we redefine ourselves. We don't need to hang onto our aspirations from the first half of life.

What happens when we ignore this insight into aging, and try to do the same things in the second half of life that we did in the first half? I suspect this is a root cause of career burnout. Career success doesn't motivate us in our 50s like it did in our 30s. For most of us, the second half is a time to find significance elsewhere. Using Jung's insights into aging, here are three ideas on managing the two halves of life.

1. Seek future freedom. There's a lot of advice given to young people to follow their heart, regardless of money. I wouldn't argue with that if you felt called to be a missionary in a remote part of the world. Those that have that type of clarity of purpose early in life are fortunate.

But many of us had no idea in our 20s what we wanted to do for the next 30 years. Does anyone imagine today's 20-somethings have a better handle on that same question?

My contention: Without a clear-cut mission in life, why not follow the money when you're young? I think I found almost everything interesting in my 20s. I loved rock music and could have become a low-paid roadie. But I also found finance interesting in my 20s. As a banker, I could do interesting work and help people, while also making money and saving for the future. It worked well for me.

The goal is to move toward financial independence in the first half of life. It's wonderful to have resources set aside so we have the freedom to reinvent ourselves with a more mature sense of purpose.

My point: Unless you have a distinct calling, why not save as much money as you can early in life by pursuing a fulfilling but decently paid [career](#)? That way, as you reach your 50s and beyond, you'll have some capital built up to fund a new path if you find you're no longer engaged in your career.

2. Find purpose. Even as we age and lose interest in our career, we may still lack focus about a new purpose. Fortunately, there are some exercises we can do to help us.

George Kinder wrote the book [The Seven Stages of Money Maturity](#) and trains financial advisers to help clients figure out what they want to do with their life. He suggests three excellent questions to help discover what's truly important to each of us. I find them great conversation starters for those struggling to find their life's purpose. Here are paraphrased versions of the three questions:

- If you just won \$10 million, how would you change your life?
- If you found out you have just five years to live, but you're in good health, what would you do?
- If you're told today that you have only 24 hours to live, what regrets would you have about your life?

Ask a spouse or close friend to spend a little time talking through these types of questions. As you discover hidden aspirations, you might try some of them out. And if you discover these ideas are something you want to pursue, it may open the pathway to a new direction in life.

3. Give back. Consider what you can pass on to others. There's a big need for mentors in our society. No one is better suited than those of us with some experience and wisdom to share from our life's first half.

[Encore.org](#) is an organization that has recognized that aging is an opportunity for us to redefine who we are as we age. Mentorship is one of those opportunities. Encore.org can assist by connecting those over age 50 with younger folks. Alternatively, if you're a grandparent, uncle or aunt, you probably don't need any help finding a mentee.

Religious traditions capture this same insight. We see older men and women in the church transitioning from their first calling to [teaching](#) the community's younger members. These opportunities continue to exist in churches, as well as in many nonprofits.

For those of us still connected to our first-half profession, running development programs can be one of the most rewarding times of our career. I just got a "thank you" note from a single mom who graduated with an accounting degree because of the goals she set in a program I led. It's one thing to succeed ourselves. But it's hugely gratifying to play some small part in the success of others.

Joe Kesler is the author of [Smart Money with Purpose](#) and the founder of a [website](#) with the same name, which is where a version of this article first appeared. He spent 40 years in community banking, assisting small businesses and consumers. Joe served as chief executive of banks in Illinois and Montana. He currently serves on two bank boards. Check out Joe's previous [articles](#).