

A Conversation with Mark S. Walton

Author of

Boundless Potential

Transform Your Brain, Unleash Your Talents,
Reinvent Your Work in Midlife and Beyond

Q. For those of us looking to reinvent our work in our 40's or beyond, your book provides a 3-step process that you call the 'Design of Reinvention.' What are the steps and some of their basic tenets?

Well, first I should mention that the process that I focus on in the book is a real-life methodology, a blueprint of “best practices” that I uncovered during five years of interviewing and studying *reinventive* people. By reinventive, I mean men and women who, in midlife and beyond, successfully created a new form of lifework that they could love and profit from—financially, psychologically and physically—well into their 70's, 80's, even 90's.

What I learned about such people was that, regardless of their previous careers or professions, all followed a remarkably similar pattern, or path, toward successful reinvention. Their first step was to examine their lives up to that point, and to ask themselves: given what I've seen, know about, and have experienced thus far, what is it that really *fascinates* me? What tugs at my mind and heart strings? Maybe it's business, for instance, or technology, or the creative arts, or coaching or leadership. What, even if I don't fully understand why, truly lights me up? For successfully reinvented people, reflecting on and identifying this was the first step in the process.

Step #2 was to explore ways in which their personal fascination could be translated into action – into real-world work that they would deeply enjoy, and that would empower them to succeed. What type of work would allow them to experience what psychologists call *flow*, that special happiness that comes from challenges that really matter? That's what they needed to decide.

And the third step was to determine what type of *structure* they'd need in order to materialize this new work in the world and marketplace. Some of the people I interviewed for *Boundless Potential* answered this by starting new businesses, others by creating new roles, careers, or nonprofits through which they could express their fascinations, reinvent their work and reach new levels of success in their lives.

Q. You dedicate a big part of one chapter to ways in which we can discover our personal "fascination." What do you mean by fascination and why is it critical to discovering our hidden potential?

You know, I've run my own enterprise for nearly 20 years, and before that I was in the news industry for about as long – both of these are pretty left brain, thought oriented endeavors. And I can easily see how we get stuck in thinking that the day-to-day doing of things is where success and fulfillment of our potential lies. But the smartest research on achievement shows that this is only half of the story. High performance begins with the question: For me personally, what's worth doing? What pulls my attention forward? Simply put, what fascinates me? That's where genuine success begins, and that's what sustains it over the long haul. All you have to do is look at superstars in any field: business, sports, politics, the performing arts, and so on. Wherever you look, you see that doing what they love, what fascinates them, is the foundation for their success, and the wellspring of their full potential. So, the process of reinventing ourselves in midlife and beyond quite organically begins with the question: *What Fascinates Me?*

Q. As the book makes clear, in the wake of the Great Recession, the world is filled with new challenges. Millions of people in their 40's and beyond have lost jobs, often at the peak of their careers. Millions more have seen their finances devastated. How do those who unexpectedly need to reinvent themselves overcome emotional obstacles and find new paths to a rewarding future?

I think the key lies in realizing that all of us between the ages of 40 and 70 are living a completely different life than our parents, grandparents or any generation that ever came before us. We are the world's first knowledge workers – people whose careers have been built largely, if not entirely, on using our minds. Secondly, we are the first generation in history that can expect to live into our 80's, 90's, or beyond. When you ponder the confluence of these new realities, they propel you to a kind of crunch point – an experience of uncertainty, even of fear, and quite understandably.

Then, regardless of whether you're in financial trouble or not, a question hits you between the eyes: What Should I, What Must I Do with the rest of this incredibly different new life that I've been given? If you let this question simmer a while, you come to realize that the brain that's experiencing this moment of anxiety is the same brain that we've developed and relied on since we were kids. And now it's the tool we can use to create our personal answers. If necessity is the mother of invention, we each have within us the power to re-invent our paths, if we're willing to put our minds to the task. Feel the fear, in other words, and then move forward intelligently.

Q. In the chapter of the book on the Neuroscience of Potential, you mention that much of what has long been believed about our mental capabilities is wrong and that "the human brain was never designed for decline or retirement but for continual reinvention and success." How have today's leading discoveries in neuroscience proven this?

Now you're getting into the area of my research that was the biggest and most exciting breakthrough for me personally, as I know it will be for others. Almost all of our lives, we've been told that the older we get, the more our brains will naturally wear out. And that's what even the top brain scientists believed, until just a few years ago, when everything changed, completely. What happened was the invention of high-tech neuroimaging devices, things with strange names like PET and SPEC, which allowed neuroscientists to look directly inside the working brain. The impact of this was equivalent to the introduction of the telescope into the field of astronomy. Suddenly, you could see close-up what was really happening instead of theorizing about it.

And what's really happening is this: the average mature brain may lose some of the processing speed and accuracy that the average younger brain has, but it is hardly inferior – to the contrary. The fact is, the mature brain is *organized* differently than the younger brain and, especially when adequately challenged, it keeps growing and developing new strengths and assets that the average younger brain cannot compete with. *Simply put, starting around midlife our brain is wired for reinvention - of itself, of our work and of our lives overall.*

One of the fascinating things about this is that it helps to explain why some of the greatest achievements in science, business, politics and the arts have come from men and women in their 70's, 80's and beyond. People like the architect Frank Lloyd Wright, the heart surgeon Michael DeBakey, Albert Schweitzer, Mother Teresa, Winston Churchill. The list goes on. In fact, my book is filled with people like these – and not just celebrities, but lots of 'regular' folks as well. What the new neuroscience has revealed it that these are *not* exceptions to the rule, *not* human aberrations. What these individuals did in midlife and beyond was to keep pushing their brains – they kept reinventing their lifework. And what their brains did was take them to new levels of achievement beyond anything they had previously experienced.

Q. Is there really such a thing as the gift of wisdom? Can our perspectives and mental abilities actually change for the better as we age?

Without a shadow of a doubt. What became clear to me in my research is that what we've called wisdom through the ages is not a myth and, again, not a gift reserved for only a select few of us. Wisdom is what psychologists call a developmental product – it is the *potential sum total* of natural biological changes in our brains as we mature, as well as our life experiences, especially those we've had in challenging personal, educational or career situations.

Let me give you an example from the book: the story of US Airlines Captain Chesley Sullenberger who, at age 58, made a split-second decision to land his crippled Airbus 320 with 155 passengers in the Hudson River, rather than try to make it back to the airport or crash land it in midtown Manhattan. The way the experts see it, that instant decision was a gift of wisdom – of intelligence that was crystallized in his brain through decades of training and experience. There was no time to 'think things through' in that scenario, which is what a younger, less experienced pilot would have had to do, possibly with disastrous consequences. When we get into our 40's and beyond, our brains are filled with crystallized intelligence - brain scientists call this 'cognitive templates' – a form of wisdom that's physically seated in the left hemisphere of our brain. When we reinvent ourselves, we carry these templates of experience with us, and they form the foundation for our future success – no matter the nature or structure of our new work.

Q. The accomplishments of young “geniuses” have been well documented. But what about “late” or “unexpected bloomers”? How does creative intelligence appear later in life and what do we now know about how it happens?

Boundless Potential is filled with interviews and profiles of men and women who discovered after losing a career, or burning out in a job, or retiring, that they possessed intellectual skills and creative talents that, until then, had been locked away inside them. They didn't just “bloom” unexpectedly. These hidden potentials suddenly burst forth, carrying these people into profitable new roles, businesses and high impact social accomplishments. The key question is *how did this happen?* And, what does it mean for the rest of us? The answer I discovered, in speaking with leading researchers in the field, is that *we are literally hard-wired for reinvention and higher achievement later in life*, if only we attempt it. As we mature, our proverbial hearts and minds begin to work together in new and different ways. Technically speaking, the right (creative) side of our brain begins to collaborate more fully with the left (knowledge) side. There's a whole new field of research into this phenomenon, which is called 'bilateralization.' As one leading psychologist put it, it appears that in midlife and beyond we have access, for the first time, to mental and emotional 'all wheel drive.'

Q. In the book you provide a wealth of information on not just reinventing ourselves but also on creating lifelong happiness in the process. How can we help ensure that our choices will bring us more rewarding and fulfilling experiences in midlife and beyond?

This is another part of my research that really blew me away. There's an ancient Greek formula that hardly anyone I have spoken with, even in the fields of modern psychology or human longevity, has ever heard of. The Greeks of Athens called it the formula for *Eugeria*, their unique term for living a long, happy life. The formula stressed lifelong growth and development, and especially in midlife and beyond, giving of oneself to others, '*paying it forward*' to future generations.

A lot of people tend to discredit ancient philosophy in favor of a more scientific approach, but remember that the Greeks *invented* modern science, medicine and mathematics. And when you do the research, as I did, you discover that the average documented lifespan of Athenians who subscribed to the eugeria philosophy was nearly 71 years – a lifespan nearly as long as that of civilized populations today. And, keep in mind, this was back between 500 and 400 B.C.

Today, even though few are familiar with the term eugeria, longevity and happiness experts are increasingly convinced that the life formula the Greeks followed so many centuries ago may have been a breakthrough of enormous significance. So much so that there is an emerging new science of altruism and generosity that I explore, along with its ancient roots, in the book.

Q. In discussing how to structure your personal future you state that we need to have an entrepreneurial mindset. How so and how does thinking like an entrepreneur influence our behavior?

There have been times in history where taking charge of your own life, what I term an “entrepreneurial mindset,” was just one possible choice. The other option was to turn your career and personal horizons over to someone or something else - to an employer or an organization for example - and go along for the ride, hoping for the best. For some people, it used to work out fairly well. But, I think if the first decade of the 21st Century has shown us anything, it's that those days are pretty much gone.

Back in 1999, the great management guru Peter Drucker, then in his 90's, wrote a book entitled *Management Challenges of the 21st Century*, in which he predicted that the greatest challenge for each of us going forward would be *managing ourselves*.

He said that in the new millennium three things would likely happen when we reached our 40's or beyond: Either our careers and/or financial lives would be derailed by some rapid, unforeseen events. Or, we'd stay in the same job or field too long and burn out in it. Or, if and when we could afford to, we'd finally retire, only to find ourselves bored into an early grave. Why? Because almost all of us are knowledge workers in the 21st Century, and the brains of knowledge workers are never really finished or worn out.

So, the solution, in life's new, extended second half, is to reinvent yourself, to create your own work and, if necessary, invent your own niche, business or structure for taking that work out into the world. In other words, think and act independently and entrepreneurially. People who do that, Drucker predicted, will be the leaders, the models and the success stories of the 21st Century. So far as I can tell, he was 100% right.

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