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Over 50 and at the Top of Your Game? Here's What's Next

You've passed the half-century mark, and a question has been rattling around in your brain: "What's next?" Recently, you answered it with a single word: "work." And now you're beginning to see that you can be part of something unprecedented, that the work you do later in life can be the most satisfying of your entire career. You can, as I describe it, "ripen."

Cool.

But now a new question pops up. "What work, exactly?" Loyal readers will know that I'm writing a book called "RIPE: Rich, Rewarding Work After 50." As I listened to ripe pioneers, I began to see a pattern emerging and plotted a matrix: along one side, the reasons people begin this journey, along the other, the possible paths forward.

Where might you be on this matrix? For instance, you might have been successful in your chosen field and are now ready to try something new. You want to break new ground or implement innovative ideas, maybe realize a lifelong dream or assist in the birth of a compelling new vision.

Arianna Huffington is a terrific example of this kind of ripening. At 56, she launched the Huffington Post. As a new media model, it would welcome voices not normally heard in the mainstream press: "curated news and instant intelligent opinion for an engaged community," as she says. HuffPost quickly became one of the most widely read and talked-about new media brands.

Many boomers will answer the question, "What work, exactly?" with, "Start a business." Some of us will do it because it's something we've always wanted to do, others because we can't find work and need to create it. But hanging out a shingle is suddenly on the upswing, especially among people over 50.

Just ask the folks at the Ewing Marion Kauffman Foundation, the world's largest foundation dedicated to entrepreneurship. Their research shows that the average age of first-time entrepreneurs is

now between 55 and 64. "The United States is on the cusp of an entrepreneurship boom -- not in spite of an aging population, but because of it."

The Kauffman Foundation is referring to people like Lee Weinstein. Lee and I met when he approached me last year to introduce one of his clients, Icebreaker, an innovative sportswear company from New Zealand. I had no idea he was a ripe pioneer until we started chatting. Turns out he'd spent 15 years working for Nike and knew that it was time to get out and do something new. A two-year process of introspection led to him reinvent his work; he now runs a PR agency with his wife, who also worked at Nike. Not only are they doing well, with just the right number of clients (including Nike), but they have a more balanced life, with time to enjoy the pleasures of not working, too. Which sounds pretty ripe to me.

Given the number of emails I've received -- and the comments on the first few columns about RIPE -- I know that you're all over this idea. We're eager to hear your stories, so please share how you plan to spend the years between 50 and 100-plus, or feel free to contact me directly via my website. And since we're on the subject of valuing people of a certain age, are you wondering why this extraordinary group of people who called themselves The Elders aren't getting press coverage? As I write, The Elders have been in the Middle East for a few weeks, making a unique contribution to the peace process. I know this because I get their media releases. But I haven't seen anything about their mission in the mainstream media. What's up with that?

Julia Moulden is an author, speaker, and columnist.

Read Julia Moulden's HuffPost archive, including the first columns about RIPE.

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