

Book Appreciation



Neena Verma

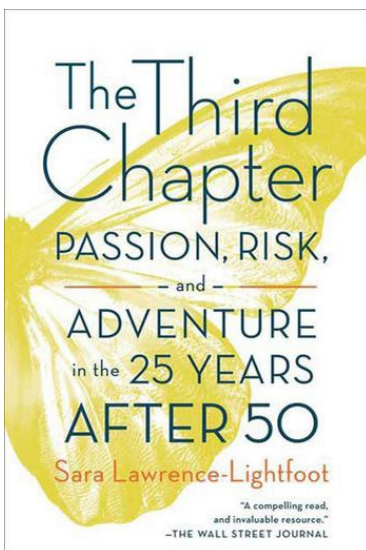
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The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk, and Adventure in the 25 Years After 50

By Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot

Sarah Crichton Books, 2009

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For those who are fifty plus in age, what was your state (emotional and mental, more than physical) at the threshold of this part-intimidating, part-inviting stage in life! And those who are soon to be there, how is yours as you are awaiting the arrival of the golden jubilee of your life? Whether you entered the post-fifty life with dread of ageing, or with invitation for rediscovery and continued growth – *Third Chapter* is here to inspire and engage you with new and/or reaffirming insights and wisdom.

In essence

The Third Chapter: Passion, Risk, and Adventure in the 25 Years After 50 by Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot, Harvard professor and MacArthur prize-winning sociologist, invokes the reader for “creative and purposeful learning” in what she calls the “Third Chapter” (the phase between fifty and seventy-five years) of life. The author travelled for two years, interviewing forty people in their “Third Chapter” of life – listening to their stories punctuated with success, vulnerability, intrigue, passion, rediscovery – to understand what motivates creative renewal and purposeful learning in life after the age of fifty. Her fascinating study unravels insights from the way these people have transformed and reinvented themselves, continuing to learn and grow with purpose, courage and creativity.

In their journey of transition, they create self-empowering narratives and find their 'stride'.

The author begins by invoking the reader, or shall I say the “Third Chapter” seeker, to “face the mirror”. She talks of “confessional moments” when people begin telling their story beyond the laments of old age, in “hushed, tentative tones”, making peace with “old/new mirror image”. These are stories of courageous people in their “Third Chapter” who acknowledge the intimidating view of old age that typically signifies “inevitable decline”, and yet refuse to be preoccupied with such “depressive” view.

Finding their stride

The book moves on to talk about “twin emotions” of “loss and liberation” through stories of leaving behind the known, trysts with the unknown and learning new things. People “confess feeling irresponsible”, taking “inappropriate” risks – letting go of their safe anchors, and sailing new oceans in what are generally perceived as years of slow-down. Facing “chasm of emptiness” and sense of feeling unproductive and powerless, these people live periods of “limbo”, and traverse the uncharted paths, curiously searching for identity and wholeness in the “Third Chapter” of life. In their journey of transition, they create self-empowering narratives and find their “stride”. At some point, the tentative leaving with fear transforms into liberating leaving with grace. Recognizing “strength and synergies of both and more”, these people move forward “slower and deeper” rather than “faster and farther”, creating a life of generativity rather than resigning with stagnation.

The author suggests that in composing a new life in their 'Third Chapter', people have to heal their wounds.

Taking forward the metaphor of “both and more”, Prof. Lawrence-Lightfoot delves into the phenomena of “constancy and change”. Citing life-span theorists, she raises an inquiry about the idea of retirement – talking of the challenges associated with choosing engagement over retreat, labour over leisure, and reinvention over retirement. She argues that research trends indicate shifts in attitude of people in their “Third Chapter” of life, “many of whom are yearning for lives of active engagement, purposefulness and new learning”. One of her interviewees talks of feeling like a “gray-haired adolescent” acknowledging her old age, but riding on her energy and commitment. In the process she is able to leverage both “old and new”. Another admits feeling uncertain, yet also convinced that the paradigm shift will only come from faith.

The author suggests that in composing a new life in their “Third Chapter”, people have to heal their wounds. This calls for the journey back home – revisiting “old burdens”. She found that in retelling their stories, her interviewees would suddenly “stumble upon a detail, a metaphor” that would prove cathartic, help them cleanse old wounds and heal themselves, preparing for what was unfolding ahead. While one interviewee calls this his “reclamation

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project”, another feels happy getting out of the “toxic-waste dump of anger” that “wouldn’t explode” but would keep leaking. Expressing awe at this “childbirth”-like process, he avows the “awakening” that it ensued.

Looking back, according to Prof. Lawrence-Lightfoot, is not just about cleansing old wounds and unburdening, but more about preparing to “give forward”. She contends that many among those wanting to create a meaningful life in their “Third Chapter” feel a compelling urge to give forward, contribute and make an imprint. There is a deeply moving account from an interviewee’s story about her “Third Chapter” journey. Absorbing the pain of listening to horrifying stories of violence, gang-rapes, and murders of children that women in displacement camps had been suffering, she deployed her “new layer of skills” to spread awareness about the gruesome conditions in Sudan and in doing so influenced policy-makers.

Transcending boundaries: A four-step process

Transcending boundaries in quest for new “intellectual, aesthetic, emotional and relational” dimensions in the “Third Chapter” of life, the author offers a four-step process. The first is to be curious, to wonder and be interested in learning something new. The second is about letting go of the fear of the unknown. She suggests this comes from acknowledging the fear and taking the *leap of faith*, thereby opening the path for next step, i.e., willingness to be vulnerable. Creating life of meaning and growth in the “Third Chapter” asks for courage to be exposed to risk of loss, hurt and judgment. The *Third Chapter* interviewees emphasize the “value of failure” as an important way to learn. “Developing empathy” is the fourth step that the author underlines as being uniquely empowering in their journey to “becoming new”.

“New learning”, in the *Third Chapter*, Prof. Lawrence-Lightfoot upholds is about “crossing borders across landscapes rich with complexity and colour” which are full of “open vistas and blind alleys”. This new learning, she claims, manifests in body, voice and soul. An interviewee shared having learnt to “think with body” not just mind, being able to notice and feel sensations in his body, and making meaning thereof. Some people “discover their voice”, able to assert with confidence and courage. And some others don’t just find new purpose, skills or vocations – they find a new “being at the core”.

Circling back to the start, where she invoked the reader to “face the mirror”, the author concludes by discussing the “cracks in the mirror” – the contrasting opposites of feeling “evolved and complete” yet also “needy and young”. The poetry by Nikki Giovanni that opens this chapter beautifully summarises the

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process of holding with power and grace these opposites in the “Third Chapter” of life, and realizing that

*we also are what we wish we did,
and age teaches us,
that even that doesn't matter.*

As I close

It is hard to critique *Third Chapter*, at least for me. The subject, the depth of inquiry and understanding, the stories and their wisdom, the synthesis by Prof. Lawrence-Lightfoot, her eloquent writing – everything makes this book a compelling read, particularly for those on the quest for creative learning and purposeful renewal in their life after the age of fifty. I feel that this book would be no less interesting and insightful for anyone younger seeking abundance and growth.

For the academically oriented, the author's expertise and experience across sociology, education and human development is unmistakably evident. Her unique “portraiture” approach brings out the essence of universal significance from a small sample of forty. Strengthening her argument with the wisdom of established theories and models by experts like Erickson, Bateson and more, the author makes a convincing case for both individual and collective benefits of continued learning and purposeful engagement in the “Third Chapter” of life. The book flows well, with narrative accounts and insightful conclusions, though intermittently it may feel a bit discontinuous, what with stories and synthesis all coming together in one (longish) sentence. Yet this is more than made up for by the author's easy, eloquent and evocative writing.

It can be argued that the small (forty) and selective (mostly well-educated and privileged) sample leaves the author's work insufficient for making empirically comprehensive conclusions. That said, I would encourage the reader to make an objective engagement with the subject and the book. There are lessons of universal appeal in the very personal stories and Prof. Lawrence-Lightfoot's insightful synthesis. The reader's guide at the end of the book is a useful aid in making a deeper connection with the essence of this unique book about successful ageing.

The author closes the book with poignant poetry by her final interviewee, who found her light in her journey through the darkness. I have no better way to close my write-up than simply quoting the same with appreciation and gratitude –

*After a long seeking
I gave up on all mirrors.
Then feeling a way forward in the fog
Without a lamp or even a candle
And absent any guide at all,
One starless night I stumbled
Upon this place of water where
Gleaming in its darkest deeps,
My own two astonished eyes.
Light.*

The book is easily available on all online market places.



Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot

The Emily Hargroves Fisher Professor of Education at Harvard University, Prof. Sara Lawrence-Lightfoot has pioneered an innovative social science method called “portraiture”. She has written several books, serves on many professional and scholarly boards and committees and has received thirty honorary degrees. A MacArthur prize-winning sociologist, Prof. Lawrence-Lightfoot is the first African-American woman in Harvard University’s history to have an endowed professorship named in her honor.

<https://www.gse.harvard.edu/faculty/sara-lawrence-lightfoot> and
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