

# PURPOSEFUL LIVES: GUIDING LIFE CYCLE TRANSITIONS

## A Talking Paper from Jan Hively

### The Questions

*How do we go beyond acknowledging that purposeful lives create good for everyone to facilitate purposeful planning all along the lifelong continuum?*

*How can we engage the energy and experience of older adults in community programs that support purposeful planning?*

To stimulate the development of community strategies that respond to that question, this “talking paper” describes key transition times in the life cycle and some community programs that facilitate purposeful planning. Ideally, everyone could access a lifework planning system with tools for: a) assessing interests and skills, b) seeing opportunities for the future; c) discerning a sense of direction and making compatible choices for the future. Realistically, planning tools are available in the library or the on the Internet, but their availability is secondary to having the opportunity to talk openly about yourself with good listeners who can provide wise counsel and appropriate feedback based on experience. Who are better qualified than community elders to listen and provide feedback? The community programs described here tap the experience of both peers and elders to expand the availability of lifework guidance.

### Times of Transition

There are key transition times in the life cycle when complex decisions are made that shape each individual’s future pattern of productivity: early adolescence, young adulthood, mid-life, older adulthood, and late life.

**Early Adolescence.** Decisions about coursework made in the transition to high school tend to determine how far students will go in high school/college education and shape career futures. Although planning materials including interest surveys, learning style inventories, personality assessments, lifework planning portfolios, and college and career information are readily available through the Internet, there are few counselors (e.g., one for every 725 students in Minneapolis) or other high school staff to guide student use of the materials and talk through a match between individual interests and life/career options. Community elders can be prepared to provide this one-to-one guidance.

**Young Adulthood.** Even though they’ve had a lot of education and collected multiple degrees, many young adults stir around through their twenties and into their thirties trying to figure out where the match is between their skills and interests and meaningful lifework in our rapidly changing society. In the process of maturation, they need some

“hopework” – finding a safe, respectful place where they can tell their stories, listen to those of others, and bring to life the highest hopes they hold for themselves and the world.

**Mid-Life.** Carl Jung said it best: “Wholly unprepared, [people] embark upon the second half of life. Or are there perhaps colleges for forty-year-olds which prepare them for their coming life and its demands as the ordinary colleges introduce our young people to a knowledge of the world and of life? No, there are none. Thoroughly unprepared, we take the step into the afternoon of life; worse still, we take this step with the false presupposition that our truths and ideas will serve us as hitherto. But we cannot live the afternoon of life according to the programme of life's morning -- for what was great in the morning will be little at evening, and what in the morning was true will at evening have become a lie.” Careers today don’t last a lifetime. Traditional retirement is neither attractive nor economically feasible for most boomers. There are few comfortable spaces where boomers can talk about their anxieties, explore the abundance of possibilities, identify their passions, and share their sense of purpose with others.

**Older Adulthood.** Productivity in later life is key to ongoing health and wellbeing. Meaningful work may be paid employment or unpaid volunteering or child care, caregiving, mutual aid or active citizenship. Retirees who are engaged in meaningful work feel more satisfied with their retirement. It’s all too easy, however, for retirees to do “more of the same” as they did before retirement or in other ways to keep busy without finding the sense of purpose associated with the selection of fulfilling, challenging and satisfying work. People approaching retirement and new retirees want the opportunity to explore their passions and options for personal direction with others in similar circumstances or, better yet, with role models who will reach out and connect them with civic engagement networks.

**Late Life.** Health and human service systems tend to focus exclusively on patient/client needs without taking their assets into account. Although research shows how engagement in meaningful work, or simply fulfilling daily responsibilities, contributes to health and wellbeing, risk-averse health care institutions usually prohibit patients from doing for themselves and/or others. Physical disabilities should not be treated as barriers to self-determination and meaningful work – pursuing a sense of purpose. Systemic change is needed to assess and apply the strengths of late-life adults. Community elders can help themselves and each other to pursue personal growth plans, through the last breath.

## Transition Programs based in Community

Every community has the capacity to support purposeful lifework planning at each of the key transition times in the lifelong continuum. Each of the program concepts described below were generated in Minneapolis but could be replicated in communities nationwide.

**Early adolescence: Career Coaches.** Throughout America, high school students without college or careers in their family background are in desperate need of career

coaches. The “No Child Left Behind” legislation has focused so exclusively on reading and math literacy that essential guidance for adolescents has been severely neglected. In response, “Achieve! Minneapolis” (a non-profit organization developed from the Youth Trust that I founded in 1989) has just opened eight Achieve! Career and College Centers with an annual budget of \$2.3 million in private sector dollars contributed by corporations and foundations. There’s a center in each high school and one for the alternative schools – each one staffed and managed by Achieve! Led by a savvy manager, Catherine Jordan, the centers' first goal is to get every ninth grader started with a "My Life" portfolio and course/lifework goals. Although corporate volunteers are helping in the centers, Achieve! needs career coaches who come from the community, look like the racially diverse students, and reflect the power of education to support career potential.

With a branch already located in the Twin Cities, the **Experience Corps** is admirably suited to work with Achieve! in recruiting retired workers who would receive training and stipends to work 15 to 20 hours a week in the centers as Career Coaches. Why not expand the responsibilities of Experience Corps volunteers beyond elementary school literacy? Career Coaches are desperately needed to stem a national crisis of hope about the capacity of K-12 education to generate a high-skilled labor force. Little known facts are that Minnesota has welcomed more refugees than any other state, and that two-thirds of Minneapolis K-12 students are students of color. This is an ideal environment for the Experience Corps to pilot a Career Coach program.

**Young Adulthood: “Hopework” and “Philosophy Camp”.** Over the last decade, John Wallace and Lynn Englund, faculty members at the University of Minnesota, have been facilitating multi-generational learning circles. “Hopework” has created an approach to teaching and learning that values the nurturing of human growth and maturity as the development essential at every age and stage of life. This learning circle comes alive as individuals give their life's stories and are fed by the stories of others. The circle connects them powerfully to the reality of their present circumstances and helps them see with fresh eyes new hopes and bolder actions for being themselves while working together to bring to life the highest hopes, dreams, and ideals they hold for the world.

Hopework activities include occasional weekend-length retreats and monthly pot-luck suppers but the recent focus has been a month-long residential course for young adults called “Philosophy Camp” (see <http://www.philosophycamp.org>);. Targeted to students completing their undergraduate education, “Lives worth Living: Questions of Self, Vocation, and Community” is held at a farm on the prairie of southwestern Minnesota. As the participants form a community of learners and engage with innovators in the region, they meet in circle to investigate questions such as these: What is an authentic self? What is vocation? What kind of community do I want to have around me? What makes communities resilient? Older adults are accepted as Fellows to join the rich discussions about Hopework at Philosophy Camp. Young adult participants describe the experience of becoming “grounded” through their experiences at Philosophy Camp.

**Mid-life: “SHiFT: Move to meaning in life and work”.** David Buck is a 46-year-old MBA who sought me out as a life coach when he decided to seek more meaning in his life and work after a layoff from a career in real estate management in Minneapolis. Our conversations led the two of us to start a burgeoning non-profit called SHiFT. The mission of SHiFT is to connect people facing mid-life transitions with the resources to bring out personal potential, enhance meaning and purpose, and foster positive community change. Since early November, evening forums have attracted 50+ attendees weekly in the back room of a coffee shop in downtown Minneapolis. A SHiFT board and institutional advisors have drafted a business plan. The business model includes free forums, a fee-based curriculum of small group dialogues, mentorships, affinity career and volunteer groups, and a network of resource partners. Older adults have been involved as presenters and mentors, along with boomers who share their stories and strengths with others. The goal is to flesh out the pilot in downtown Minneapolis during 2007 and then develop similar SHiFT networks in other geographic communities. The website is [www.shiftonline.org](http://www.shiftonline.org).

The surge of interest in SHiFT has illustrated the fact that many boomers are dealing with the pain and anxiety of career and family change in a rapidly shifting economy that is dismantling their earlier expectations for life and work. They need good listeners and authentic feedback as they explore opportunities to find meaning and purpose..

**Older adults: Three approaches to lifework planning.** “Next Chapter” programs are developing around the nation. Here are three Minnesota-based approaches with the credentials to generate expansion:

- **“Lifework after Retirement.”** During the last five years, I've conducted numerous iterations of a short course taught in community settings through the U of MN's Osher Lifelong Learning Institute. Seated in a learning circle, up to 15 recent retirees respond to “What’s next?” by sharing their experiences, meeting some role models, and considering together the broad array of opportunities for purposeful life development available to older adults. Participants check out relevant reading materials from my portable library. The outline for this five or six session course highlighting the breadth of empowering options for retirement could be followed by any experienced facilitator.
- **Purpose Project.** Recently, I've become acquainted with Richard Leider's easily replicable guide for fireside chats that accompanies his book titled “Claiming Your Place at the Fire.” Richard awakens participants to the sense of purpose and direction related to generativity. He guides older adults to think about the four flames of vital aging: Identity (Who am I?), Community (Where is my place?), Passion (What do I care about?), and Purpose (What do I have to contribute that will make a difference?). A Twin Cities resident and Senior Fellow at the U of MN, Richard is the author of "Power of Purpose," “Whistle While You Work,” and "Repacking Your Bags," as well as "Claiming Your Place at the Fire." Through the Purpose Project, he has begun the process of training older adults to facilitate fireside chats using his new “Gen Elder” discussion guide.

- **“Mapping Your Retirement.”** I am one a number of authors of a lifework planning kit that will be published for national distribution next fall to help people make choices and take action on what matters most to them. Four workbooks on “Mapping Your Journey,” “Living Your Life,” “Managing Your Money,” and “Maintaining Your Health” will be packaged with question cards that can be used to help set priorities and a pad of planning sheets. The project leaders, Mark and Janet Skeie, are recent retirees and graduates from our Advocacy Leadership for Vital Aging program who serve on the VAN Leadership Group. They have formed a non-profit and are securing broad-based support for publication and use of “Mapping Your Retirement.” Older adults will be trained as facilitators for small group use of the well-designed toolkit.

**Late life: Vital Involvement Practice.** Personal growth should continue “through the last breath.” Helen Kivnick, a U of MN professor of Social Work, authored "Vital Involvement in Old Age." with Joan and Erik Erikson. Helen has initiated an approach for developing and tracking personal growth plans right through hospice. She trains social workers and health care professionals to use Vital Involvement Practice (VIP) in their work with older adults through clinics, assisted living and long term care facilities. The VIP assessment looks at the assets as well as the needs of each individual and his or her environment. A VIP personal growth plan with daily goals results. When facilitated by all of the staff in an assisted living facility, and supported by community volunteers, the VIP plan cultivates purposeful living. The same approach could be used in the older adult’s home environment by a visiting nurse linked with older adult volunteers.

### **What’s Next?**

I believe that the best way to change norms and expectations about aging is to provide a big picture, multi-generational perspective of purposeful lives that create public good for everyone. Older adults should be engaged as elders in shaping the future for all those who come behind. They should also be engaged as learners and helpers in intergenerational programs so that they can continue to know and grow.

Each of the programs that I’ve mentioned connects people with possibilities to bring out personal potential and facilitate positive community change. We can fulfill the promise of each program and integrate these efforts within a lifelong continuum of support for purposeful lives.

If people agree that it’s useful to develop a lifelong continuum of support for purposeful living, then the next step would be to consider the overall goal/vision as well as values and principles that should be applied across the system as program criteria. This step might be pursued at the next Tarrytown conference! In the meantime, my short-term goals are to:

- 1) persuade Experience Corps to pilot a Career Coach program; and
- 2) secure funding for SHiFT’s start-up coordination and evaluation.

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