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Re-evaluating life after 50

'Reinvent' conference explores what's important.



Jane Glenn Haas
Our Time
Special to the Register

There's something about hitting the half-century mark that causes most of us to take a deep breath and give some thought to who we are, where we've been, where we seem to be going with our lives.

"We have new freedoms – the kids move out, for example – and new hardships – maybe a loved one dies – and suddenly we discover we can and want to focus on our new future," says Ken Dychtwald.

Dychtwald, the psychologist and gerontologist who first identified the longevity trend in the seminal book "Age Wave," is defining future potentials for those 50-plus.

For 30 years he has studied the personal, social and global impact of increasing longevity, summing much of his thinking in his latest book, "With Purpose: Going from Success to Significance in Work and Life."

And he concludes that the happiest 50-plusers are those that keep working, stay involved and maintain a sense of worth.

How do they do that? Dychtwald will outline his formula as keynote speaker at the Oct. 24 Refresh, Renew, Reinvent! conference in Costa Mesa sponsored by WomanSage (see womansage.org).

Much as the women's movement of the 1970s created flexibility in the workplace for child care needs, the 50-plus workplace will offer similar personal flexibility, he says.

"Smart employers will want to hang on to workers whose loyalty, knowledge and skills are essential to the organization," Dychtwald says.

At the same time, others entering "second adulthood" may decide to quit their jobs for a new life-direction, possibly to pursue a longtime passion or focus on community service.

The "second adulthood," as he defines life after 50, offers new freedoms and new wisdoms.

"We focus on relationships after 50," he says. "At the end of the day, it's not so much the stuff we've accumulated that counts to us, it's the people we care about and the relationships we have.'

There is a need to belong, to connect to a global community.

Dychtwald calls it a "life course correction," citing last year's horrible financial reckoning as an example. "We faced up to what's important in life, and that's our relationships," he says.

And so we are walking away from "retirement" in the sense of seeking happiness and satisfaction by going to the sidelines and playing 24/7.

"We need a meaningful place for leisure and recreation, but we are still working, still contributing, hopefully doing something we really want to do. We may earn less money or have less power, but we are applying ourselves in service to others," he says.

"This is the question about reinventing yourself. It's part of the challenge of a longer life. You're not old at 65 anymore. A long life doesn't necessarily mean simply being older longer."

For the first time in history, people have years – decades, even – to relish a sense of purpose.

"Throughout all of history, people worked, earned a living," he says. "Work gives people a sense of well-being. Strangely, Social Security gave people the belief that leisure time is more satisfying and fitting. We've had about a half-century to study that conclusion and, lo and behold, more than half of today's retirees are bored out of their wits.

"In truth, we have traded an illusion that retirement is all fun, and work is something to get out of. Actually, people want to work. And they want to redefine work as well."

The guideposts for a successful life are changing, Dychtwald says:

"You don't have to be rich, famous, brilliant or influential; you just have to care and want to contribute something to make life's final key transition – the one that will take you from success to significance, and to your ultimate fulfillment as a thinking, engaged and contributing member of the human race. This is your new challenge.

"Let's agree to do this together, and let's agree to start now."

Refresh, Renew, Reinvent!



Ken Dychtwald, psychologist and gerontologist, wrote the book "Age Wave." He will speak at the Refresh, Renew, Reinvent! conference on Oct. 24 in Costa Mesa.

PHOTO COURTESY KQED-TV

What: Conference includes a presentation on "The Art of Transition" by author Carol Orsborn, as well as panels and speakers on midlife personal and financial direction.

When: Oct. 24, 8 a.m. to 4 p.m.

Keynote: Ken Dychtwald, psychologist and gerontologist; author of "Age Wave."

Sponsors: WomanSage, the nonprofit for women at midlife, and WISE (Women Investing in Security and Education).

Where: Hilton Hotel, 3050 Bristol Street, Costa Mesa 714-540-7000

Cost: \$49.99 including breakfast and lunch.

Registration: See www.womansage.org

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