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“Strength to Strength: How to Find Lifelong Purpose”

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Some of you have heard me share before about the difference between a “virtuous cycle” and a “vicious cycle.” A **virtuous cycle** is a feedback loop in which the building blocks of your life mutually reinforce each other and support growth. Despite the various setbacks life throws our way, if you are in a virtuous cycle, you overall find yourself moving from strength to strength. In contrast, a **vicious cycle** is one in which one or more building blocks in your life begin to crumble—for any confluence of causes and conditions—and you find yourself in a downward spiral.

Let me also stipulate up front that everyone is not in the same position in regard to creating virtuous cycles—or preventing vicious ones. Due to historic systems of oppressions, some people have more advantages and safety nets, and others fewer—and there is a lot of work needed to level the playing field. In the meantime, it can be helpful to explore what we each can do now to incline ourselves toward a virtuous cycle.

To that end, I would like to share with you some highlights from a book published a few months ago titled *From Strength to Strength* by Arthur C. Brooks, a Professor of Social Science at Harvard University, whose primary area of research is what does and doesn’t work for humans seeking to find and create happiness. Brooks is especially interested in how we can best maintain a virtuous cycle, not only at the peak of our careers, but through the entirety of our lives.

About a decade ago, as Dr. Brooks neared age fifty, he unexpectedly found a list of professional goals that he had made on his fortieth birthday. When he wrote that list he had been sure that if he accomplished those goals, he would find happiness. With his fiftieth birthday approaching, he found he had already met or exceeded all of them: he was the president of a prominent Washington, D.C. think tank, he had published a number of bestselling books, and he was a popular public speaker. But **despite all those successes, he still “wasn’t particularly satisfied or happy”** (xiii).

He was also increasingly aware of feeling less motivated and less physically able to maintain the pace of work that helped him reach his level of professional success. He typically worked 80 hours/week—approximately 12 hours/day, 7 days/week (*ibid*).

I work a lot, but I don’t work 80 hours/week and even in my early forties, I can already appreciate where Brooks is coming from. What is sustainable longterm feels different to me now than in my twenties. And some of my perspectives have changed about what *really* brings me happiness and satisfaction.

I want to share with you some of the major findings of Brooks’s research, but let me warn you: there’s good news and bad news. I’ll start with the bad news, but there really is good news coming shortly, so stick with me!

Here’s the thing: the results are in, and it shows that all of us human beings begin to experience declines somewhere between our late thirties and early fifties. I’ll give you three representative examples:

- Declines show up earliest in professional **athletes**, whose peak performance for “explosive power or sprinting” tends to start decreasing around age thirty (4).
- **Scientists** tend to get one more decade of peak productivity than athletes; nevertheless, the chances of making a paradigm-shifting scientific discovery decreases precipitously after your late thirties (5).
- Similarly, for **entrepreneurs**, there is much less creative innovation after age thirty (7).

There are parallels in essentially every skill-related field.

Now, please be assured that the takeaway is not to encourage ageism; it’s actually the opposite. But before we can get to the good news, it is necessary to honestly confront the reality of our situation. To do that, Brooks invites us to imagine

that there are three doors in front of us to choose among, as on the old game show Let's Make a Deal:

1. You can choose Door Number One, *denial and anger*: "You can deny the facts and rage against decline—setting yourself up for frustration and disappointment."
2. You can choose Door Number Two, *despair*: "You can shrug and give in to decline—and experience your aging as an unavoidable tragedy."
3. Or you can choose Door Number Three, *acceptance and change*: "You can accept that what got you to this point won't work to get you into the future—that you need to build some new strengths and skills." (22).

Brooks' research shows that learning to work skillfully with the changing reality of our lives is the key to sustaining a virtuous cycle and moving from strength to strength all the way through the end of your life. As you sometimes hear in meditation circles, "You can't stop the waves of change, but you can learn to surf!"

So, what does this look like specifically? As we age, we humans tend to be slower at solving some sorts of problems and less able to brainstorm paradigm-shifting innovations. That's the bad news. But don't miss the good news: as we age, we also find ourselves with new capacities *unavailable* to younger folks with less life experience. With age, we become "**better at combining and utilizing complex ideas [and] at interpreting the ideas that others have**—sometimes even to the people who came up with them" (24).

Researchers describe this difference as the shift from *fluid* intelligence ("the ability to reason, think flexibly, and solve novel problems" which tends to decrease in your forties, and *crystallized* intelligence ("the ability to use a stock of knowledge learned in the past"), which "tends to *increase* with age...and does not diminish until quite late in life, if at all" (26-27). I love that: increasing awareness that our ability to use our accumulated knowledge and experience increases with age "and does not diminish until quite late in life, if at all."

Brooks summarizes this research this way: "**When you are young, you have raw smarts; when you are old, you have wisdom. When you are young, you can generate lots of facts; when you are old, you know what [facts] mean and how to use them**" (27).

Here's a real-life example of why this matters. Today, almost a century-and-a-half after his death, the name Charles Darwin remains world famous for being one of the most influential scientists of all time for his contributions to evolutionary biology. In his own day, Darwin was well known through the end of his life, and was "buried as a national hero in Westminster Abbey." Yet, internally he was increasingly dissatisfied in old age. (He lived to be 73.) In his final years, he wrote, "I have not the heart or strength at my age to begin any investigations lasting years, which is the only thing which I enjoy. I have everything to make me happy and contented, but life has become very wearisome to me" (3).

Keeping in mind the story of Darwin's dispiriting final chapter, let's compare the life of Johann Sebastian Bach. Bach skyrocketed to fame in his youth. At age fifteen, he was performing pieces on the organ that others swore were impossible (39). He "published more than a thousand compositions for all the available instruments of his day" (35). As some of you have heard me quote before, **"Not all musicians believe in God, but they all believe in Bach!"**

But time and change come for us all. Even though Bach was the undisputed master of *baroque* music, he was eventually overshadowed by none other than one of his own sons, C. P. E. Bach. J. S. Bach's baroque style became increasingly viewed as "old-fashioned and stuffy" and it was the young C. P. E., not Johann Sebastian, who found it easiest to innovate in the emerging *classical* period.

Unlike Darwin, who "hit a wall and ended his life increasingly despondent and depressed," J. S. Bach was able to reinvent himself (38). Even as his son displaced him "as the family's musician celebrity," Johann Sebastian found his final decade—from his mid-fifties through his mid-sixties—to be deeply meaningful. His great project during that time was writing *The Art of Fugue* that remains an influential contribution to the teaching of baroque compositional techniques today. J. S. Bach "experienced professional decline as a musical innovator, [but] far from frustration and depression, he finished out his life as a happy father and reinvented himself as a teacher" (37).

That same invitation and opportunity will eventually be before all of us if we live long enough: the challenge of finding and creating a meaningful second half of life. Can we learn to make the most of our *crystallized* intelligence, sharing the wisdom from all

that we've learned and experienced—to continue moving from strength to strength in a virtuous cycle?

I should also say that the perspective Brooks is promoting is not new, although his view is grounded in modern social science research. Two thousand years ago, the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero taught that **a meaningful second half of life is created by dedicating yourself to three things—service, wisdom, and counsel:**

- *Service*: seek opportunities to serve others.
- *Wisdom*: share the hard-won insights learned through decades of experience.
- *Counsel*: rather than the building up of self, assets, and prestige that can predominate the first half of life, shift your priorities to “mentoring, advising, and teaching others” (31).

Another way of framing this shift is this: one of the primary skills in the first half of life is *addition*—getting more and more of many different things—stuff, facts, money, etc. But one of the primary skills in the second half of life is skillful *subtraction* (68). As the saying goes, **“The one who dies with the most toys, still dies”** (69).

Brooks challenges us to consider that at a certain point in mid-life, we can radically increase and extend our happiness and satisfaction if we pivot to giving away what we have learned, experienced, and collected over the years through volunteering and supporting worthy causes, as well as mentoring, advising, and teaching the upcoming generations.

Brooks' insights are interestingly parallel to what Buddhism calls the three *poisons* (delusion, greed, and hatred) and the three corresponding *antidotes* (wisdom, generosity, and compassion):

- *Delusion* is clinging to diminishing fluid intelligence instead of the *wisdom* of leaning into the new increasing strength of crystallized intelligence.
- *Greed* is continuing to want to add to short-term ego satisfaction instead of pivoting to *generosity*, the wisdom of letting go and giving away freely
- *Hatred* is raging against inevitable changes with time instead of embracing *compassion* for one's self and other humans.

For the mathematically inclined, here is Brooks' attempt to distill this insight into a formula: "**Satisfaction = What you have ÷ what you want**" (86). If you imagine this formula as a fraction, in the first half of life, we are encouraged to focus on the *numerator* (the top half) of what you have. But in the second half of life, a critical factor can be changing the *denominator*, decreasing what you *want* (86). In the words of a Spanish mystic, "**[The one] who has the most, needs least. Don't create needs for yourself**" (87).

This approach of wise subtraction is sometimes called a "reverse bucket list" (91). Don't get me wrong, there can sometimes be important things that you really do want to do before you die. If so, do them if you can before you run out of time. On the other hand, it can also be tremendously liberating, to look at a bucket list that you wrote years earlier and declare about one or more items, "**This will not bring me the happiness and peace I seek, and I simply don't have time to make it my goal. I choose to detach myself from this desire**" (92). That is the liberating wisdom of *subtraction*, of changing the *denominator* on the formula of your happiness and contentment.

As Brooks sometimes says to his graduate students at Harvard, who are mostly in their late twenties: given that the average life expectancy of U.S. citizens is a little less than 80 years, you all may have *only fifty or sixty Thanksgivings left*, and only twenty or thirty with your parents. That puts things in perspective.

Surveys show that,

the average American considers the beginning 'old age' [to be age eighty-five, but that's] six years after the average person dies. We avoid thinking realistically about the length of our lives and our time left, lulling us into the false belief that we have all the time in the world. (94)

Being honest about our mortality can help focus us on making the most of the time we do still have on this Earth.

How can we incline ourselves up to be less like Darwin (unrealistically measuring himself against expectations of the fluid intelligence that began to decline decades earlier) and more like Bach, reinventing ourselves as teachers, mentors, and elders—

leveraging crystallized intelligence that, “tends to *increase* with age...and does not diminish until quite late in life, if at all.”

As I move toward my conclusion, let me underscore that Brooks says if he could raise people’s awareness of one common pitfall it would be this: beware the lie that, “**If it feels good, do it.**” He is not saying that there’s anything wrong with pleasure. Rather, he is cautioning against too great a focus on short-term satisfaction. In his words, “**The world lies: idols will not make you happy, and thus you must not worship yourself**” (216). Our invitation instead is to make that shift from addition (accumulating things for ourselves) to subtraction: being generous with our time, talent, and treasure.

From a more positive angle, he says that if he had to try and distill everything he has learned from all his research into seven words it would be this:

Use things.

Love people

[Revere the Sacred.] (217)

Those seven words are worth pondering in the days to come. “*Use things*”: How might the spirit of wise subtraction be inviting you, me, or us to loose our ties to mere things? “*Love people*”: how might the spirit of love be calling us to connect more fully, generously, and open-heartedly to those around us? And “*Revere the Sacred*”: who and what truly matters to you in this season of your life? What will help you move from strength to strength all the way to the end?