

Forks in the Road

Helping Clients Choose a Meaningful Life Path

By Mary Radu

As professionals who work with older adults, many of your clients are going to be baby boomers. They're going to seek your help in making the transition from the "building and doing" stage of life into the next stage of adulthood. These clients are facing identity shifts; they're moving out of the familiar roles of full-time parents and nest and wealth builders, and now they are ready to consider the next step. Some will be ready to move beyond building a resume of accomplishments and accumulating material possessions. They may feel a need for new roles or different activities and vocations that will bring more meaning and purpose to their lives.

Often these people have little idea of how to address these bigger issues. They require help and may turn to you. The client's confusion can be frustrating and limit your ability to offer the best of your services and solutions. You might not feel well equipped to deal with these broader life-planning questions that reach beyond your area of expertise. But just imagine how much easier and more effective your services could be if you were familiar with a process for helping clients find the broader answers and define a clear path for their future.

David J. Powell, Ph.D., articulates some core concepts and choices we can offer our clients as they face this time of transition and planning for the second half of life (2005).

Dr. Powell states that at some point in our forties or fifties, we are faced with "a crisis of limitations." Our sense of having unlimited energy and physical possibilities shifts to seeing the limits in what we can accomplish, limits in how long we might live, and loss of important relationships.

This shifting is what causes our clients to reach out for professional help. Powell describes three alternatives, or forks in the road, that we can choose for this next stage of our active adult lives.

The Three Forks in the Road

The first fork in the road finds the traveler striving "to ascend the ladder even higher." This road focuses the journey on creating external success by accomplishing more and, therefore, having more "power, prestige, and possessions." Although this path may create external results, the quality of experience may feel shallow or empty. Think of the executive who places all of her focus on work and later in life finds herself without family or close friends.

Dr. Powell calls the second fork *The Rusted-Out Road*. The traveler on this road continues to do the same old thing, running into the same roadblocks and vistas. Disappointment and frustration can be expressed internally, resulting in depression and addictions, and externally, resulting in blame, negativity, or indifference to life.

The third fork, which I call *The Meaningful Way*, begins by taking an inward journey. This journey requires us to help our clients pause and get off the outward track. As the focus moves inward, the traveler begins to look at what is personally meaningful. Society's external measurements of success take on less importance. Being on this path opens up the opportunity for clients to discover what brings positive energy and joy into their lives as well as the motivation to achieve their financial, health, and lifestyle goals. They may find renewed meaning in current activities and a new way of internally experiencing success.

New directions can emerge along with alternatives for creating a legacy.

For clients who are seeking The Meaningful Way, choosing this fork is not necessarily easy or comfortable. When we as professionals are comfortable with these issues in our own lives, we are more equipped to offer options that reveal the possibilities for our clients. They are better able to hear us when they trust that we have explored these challenges for ourselves. As Powell states, “If their journey calls them to be vulnerable . . . we, as helping professionals, need to face our own vulnerability . . . too.” He goes on to say, “Helping others involves attraction. They see something in us they want. We will not be judged by our performance as much as by the spirit of our performance.”

With trust, clients will be more willing to have us guide them by suggesting that they use introspection to learn what is most important for this time of life. We can also be role models for going through times of “not knowing” as they explore options and allow new directions to emerge.

The Meaningful Way

Martin, one of my clients, chose to explore the third fork.

When we first met, he was an accomplished fifty-five-year-old who was ready for something more. He served as executive director of an agency providing public relations and marketing for a merchant’s association, and he had been on the rusted-out road for quite some time. His current job was not giving him much satisfaction, and he also had a dream to write a book that was not getting written. Staying on the rusted-out road kept him focused on the problems rather than any opportunities for making changes in any part of his life. Once he decided to get on the road to meaning, he hired me as a coach.

Our work began with Martin spending two to three hours in introspection, pondering his current life and his dreams for the future, by using a questionnaire that I offer in my coaching practice (Radu and Mann 2007). The self-assessment

tool walked him through a process to identify what was working and not working in key areas of his life, as well as his desires for the future, including his career, finances, health, relationships, leisure activities, personal development, and physical environment.

Using what he learned through introspection, he wrote a vision statement that represented the qualities and core values that were most important to him. This process of self-reflection and self-knowledge allowed him to start seeing the view along the road differently. He began seeing specific opportunities for bringing more of his desired qualities into his daily activities, and this, in turn, motivated him to take exploration steps down some new roads. Here is what Martin did with what he learned.

Martin’s Story

“I used to joke that my purpose in life was to find my purpose in life. I thought it was a clever line, and it may have been funny to anyone else hearing it for the first time, but after twenty-five years, any humor it had for me was long gone. I hadn’t been happy in my work for years, but I seemed paralyzed about making a change, or even starting the process of making a change. For that reason, I reluctantly turned to coaching.

“When I signed up for coaching, I had two goals. I wanted to change jobs and actually write the book that for the past several years I’d been saying I was writing. Coaching helped me take a look at both. I began to realize several things. First, while my job has some low points, it’s not bad. At least, it’s not as bad as I sometimes make it out to be—a result of my focusing on the negative. I can get myself all worked up about what bad things could happen, instead of just living in the moment. I began to realize that most things I had worried about never came to pass. I decided not to worry until I had good reason to, and I noticed that wasn’t very often.

“Second, I realized that getting a different job in my field wasn’t the answer. Although the reframing I described above has helped, what I’m doing isn’t what I want to do forever. Why go someplace else

and start doing the same thing in a different environment? So I'm not going anywhere for a while.

"Third, I started to do things I've wanted to do for years. I've started bicycling to work most days and I love it. I feel much better all the way around when I bike to work. Better still, I've started writing. I've written more in the three months since starting coaching than I've written in the past two years. I'm better organized about how I'm doing it, too. Writing an outline so I know what I'm going to write sounds like common sense now, but I hadn't written one. Now I have. I know the book will be written and hopefully published. What I'm really looking forward to is when the movie based on it comes out.


"It's hard to isolate an experience and say I'm different now, and it's because of this one thing, but coaching has had a positive impact. I'm more confident and relaxed. I've set goals for myself that, for the first time, are realistic. I'm doing what it will take to accomplish those goals, and I will stay on that path, unless something happens, indicating a course adjustment. Then I'll adjust."

Five Steps Down the Meaningful Way

As a CSA, many of your clients might be ready to take on that meaningful third road. Here are some steps I find effective in my coaching that you can use to help them move forward:

1. Help your clients identify one next step that they can take to move forward and gain clarity about what will bring meaning to the next phase of life. Keep it small and doable. For example, suggest that they start taking the inward journey by journaling on what gives them the most joy and meaning in life.
2. Set a time frame for completing that step and recommend that clients schedule a specific time for carrying out the actual activity.

3. Help them identify a friend or family member to whom they can be accountable for completing that action. Have the clients schedule a check-in time.
4. Schedule your own check-in with your clients in order to help them keep the commitment to you. Help them celebrate the act of moving forward and taking action.
5. Plan your next step for assisting each individual on the journey and repeat this process.

As a CSA, you have the potential to help your clients make effective transitions into the next stage of their lives with a new mature identity; fulfilling roles; and secure, satisfying lifestyles. Explore your own life-planning concerns. Bring this personal understanding to your services along with your professional knowledge. Encourage your clients to focus on broader whole-life planning to find what will make their lives more meaningful. You will be rewarded with clients who experience greater clarity and open up new opportunities for you to serve them effectively. 

References

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- Radu, Mary, and Cheryl Mann. 2007. "Roadmap to Meaningful Midlife: Create Your Vision and Action Plan." <http://www.RoadmapToMeaningfulMidlife.com> (accessed on April 26, 2008).

Mary Radu guides midlife individuals and couples through life's next stage. For life-planning tools, a copy of her e-zine, and a sample of her program "Roadmap to Meaningful Midlife," go to www.PathmakerCoaching.com, or contact her at mary@pathmakercoaching.com.