

The Silver Realigning:
How Baby Boomers Who Have Lost Their Jobs
Can Become More Positive And Find New Meaning In Their Lives

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A Capstone Project Submitted

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
Master of Applied Positive Psychology

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August 1, 2014

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Abstract

Many Baby Boomers are finding (or may be finding) themselves in a difficult transition, as they lose their jobs in this listless economy. For most of them, not yet ready to retire, finding a new, equally well-paying job in their field will be extremely difficult. How can they go through the initial disbelief, anger, sadness and fear that come with losing their jobs; and rediscover their sense of direction, purpose, security and identity? As 8,000 Baby Boomers turn 60 each day for the next ten years, this question takes on enormous proportions. Positive psychology offers many insights and interventions for individuals who are facing such a challenging time. By identifying and focusing on their inherent strengths; developing ways to reflect more deeply; amplifying their optimism; enhancing their resilience; and connecting more genuinely with others, they may open themselves up to new possibilities – discovering a new sense of purpose and meaning in their next chapter. From there, they will be able to craft a compelling new vision of themselves, connecting who they are with what happened, where they are going, and how they plan to get there. The intention of this work is to provide hope, solace, insights, and direction for individuals who are feeling lost – helping them find their own compass, pointing in a new, more positive direction.

Introduction

At precisely one second after midnight on New Year's Day, 1946, in a Philadelphia hospital, Kathleen Casey-Kirschling became the first Baby Boomer; although she would not be dubbed that officially for another 39 years, when an historian located her (Jones, 1980). Her father was a veteran, her mother a housewife; she danced on *American Bandstand*, and drove a BMW for a while. She married for the first time at twenty, later divorced, then remarried, and has two children, as well as five grandchildren. She and her husband own investment property in Florida, as well as a forty-two foot trawler they keep in Chesapeake Bay called "First Boomer" (Smith & Clurman, 2007). Now a 68-year-old retired teacher, she is periodically asked to speak on behalf of her generation, those born between 1946 and 1964, who took for granted a world of unbridled economic optimism, unprecedented abundance and wide-ranging prosperity (Welch & Bazar, 2005). Essentially, her message has always been upbeat and positive. She and her nearly 80 million cohorts did not have to aspire to the American Dream; they felt they were born into it (Smith & Clurman, 2007). The presumption of prosperity freed them from the psychological burden of worrying about basic survival and safety, allowing them to pursue what Abraham Maslow identified as the higher level needs of Belongingness and Love, Esteem, Self-Actualization and Self-Transcendence (1954).

The starting point for the Baby Boom Generation, which began in earnest as the first soldiers returned home from World War II, was their shared expectations about the future, rooted in the robust economic growth of their formative years. This fundamental belief in the future afforded them a generational luxury of focusing on self-discovery, self-development and self-fulfillment (Smith & Clurman, 2007). They also share an attribute of overriding importance:

neoteny or “the retention of youthful qualities by adults,” including curiosity, playfulness, eagerness, fearlessness, warmth and energy (Bennis & Thomas, 2002).

Raised to dream and believe in the impossible, they embraced President Kennedy’s challenge to go to the moon. As the soundtrack of this generation encouraged them to dance in the streets (Gaye, Stevenson, & Hunter, 1964), their poets reminded them to hold onto an undeniable sense of being *Forever Young*, with a wish of *building a ladder to the stars and climbing on every rung* (Dylan, 1974); and to believe that *you can learn to be you in time...all you need is love* (Lennon & McCartney, 1967). As George Vaillant (1995) explains: “From four to five, we are all romantics; we are all embryonic royalty, budding ballerinas, or intrepid astronauts; we are all fearless, open, affectionate and beautiful” (p. 120). In many ways, Baby Boomers have kept, deep inside of themselves, the best qualities of four-year olds, being utterly engaged with the world, and always seeking new possibilities (Bennis & Thomas, 2002). The Boomers have rightly been described as a lucky and privileged cohort (Roberts, 2012).

While Boomers recognize that they are aging, they do not see themselves as getting older. In 1996, Yankelovich conducted a survey asking them the age at which they thought old age begins. The median response was 79.5. It is interesting to note that in 1996, the average life span in the United states was 76.1, so it is not too far a stretch to conclude that Baby Boomers think they will die before they get old (Smith & Clurman, 2007). Mirroring this, in a 2009 Pew Research survey, typical Baby Boomers said they feel nine years younger than their chronological age (Cohn & Taylor, 2010).

However, as a sign of the times, and a possible harbinger of times to come, Kathleen Casey-Kirschling, at the age of 62, added another dimension to her recognition as an historical footnote by becoming the first Baby Boomer to file to collect early retirement benefits; even

though she recognized that her decision would cut her lifetime Social Security benefits by nearly one-third (Faler, 2007).

Two factors are merging, causing many in the Baby Boom Generation to feel that, just as they are getting older, the American Dream may somehow be slipping through their grasp (Cohn & Taylor, 2010).

They are being squeezed between a number of demographic and economic events that are occurring simultaneously. First, the human lifespan has nearly doubled in the last century (Kertzer & Laslett, 1995). This is compounded by the fact that Boomers comprise the single largest generation in history (Dychtwald, 2005). As Baby Boomers age and live longer, they are experiencing, as it is being created, an extended period of psychosocial development (Kertzer & Laslett, 1995). This new psychosocial age of development, which may extend for two decades, has no precedence. A new vision of life experience will be redefined in ways not yet understood (Dychtwald, 2005).

Meanwhile, in the current listless economy, the United States Labor Department's jobs reports present a strong case for crowning Baby Boomers as the most seriously-effected victims of the recession and its grim aftermath (Rampbell, 2013). Those Americans in their 50s and early 60s, those nearing retirement age who do not yet have access to Medicare and Social Security, have lost the most earnings power of any age group, with their household incomes ten percent below what they made when the recovery began in 2010, according to Sentier Research (Green & Coder, 2013). U.S. Census Bureau data, confirms that Boomers lost more than other groups in the stock market and housing bust of 2008, and in the aftermath many also lost their jobs at a critical point in their productive years (Hymowitz, 2014). Their retirement savings and home values fell sharply at the worst possible time: just when they needed to tap into them.

The biggest fear for 61 percent of Baby Boomers is that they will outlive their money (Allianz Life Insurance Company, 2010). Indications are that for the first time in generations, when Baby Boomers retire, they will probably be worse off than their parents when they retired. More than half of those aged 50 to 64 believe their standard of living in retirement will be worse than their parents' (AARP Public Policy Institute, 2011). Baby Boomers are keenly aware that they do not have the safety net of pensions and other benefits their parents had, according to Alicia Munnell, Director of the Center for Retirement Research at Boston College. She underscores that they are facing "a much more challenging old age" (Hymowitz, 2014). Meanwhile, new research suggests that Boomers may actually lose up to three years from their lives because their health, income security and mental well-being were battered by the effects of the recession at a crucial time in their lives (Coile, Levine, & McKnight, 2013).

In the midst of these economic storms, the job market has been especially unkind to older workers (Rampell, 2013). AARP randomly surveyed 5,000 people 50 and older who were in the workforce, and found that nearly 30 percent had experienced involuntary unemployment in the past three years (AARP, 2011). They are keenly aware that once out of a job, older workers have a much harder time finding another job. The average duration of unemployment for older people was over a year, according to a recent United States Labor Department jobs report (Tugend, 2013). Displaced Boomers also believe they are victims of age discrimination, because employers can easily find a young, energetic worker who will accept lower pay and who can potentially stick around for decades rather than a few years (Rampell, 2013).

Giving voice to what is perceived as age discrimination by job-seeking Baby Boomers, Daniel Hamermesh, an economics professor at the University of Texas in Austin said, "It just doesn't make sense to offer retraining for people 55 and older. Discrimination by age, long-term

unemployment, the fact that they're now at the end of the hiring queue, the lack of time horizon just does not make it sensible to invest in them" (Rampell, 2013, p.1).

Keenly aware of this, Richard Shields, a former global manager of technology services, has spent the past four years working on individual projects for different companies. Prior to that, the 62-year-old executive headed teams of 25 people for companies like Raytheon and PriceWaterhouseCoopers. But with mergers, restructurings, and outsourcing, Shields has come to realize that his professional life has changed irrevocably. "In the past few years, I have gone down the route of trying to be hired, investing a significant amount of time in multiple interviews for positions where it was down to just me and one other candidate," he said (personal communication, June 25, 2014). "Then everything goes dark and quiet. I'd follow up, and hear that the decision was being delayed. Then two months later comes this rather impersonal email saying, 'Thanks, but no thanks.'" Sighing, he said, "There is no question that age is a factor in obtaining full-time employment. All of those years of experience, ironically, end up working against you. Many younger managers, understandably, do not want to hire someone who reminds them of their parents. They're probably thinking, 'He will be stuck in his ways. He's used to making more money. And he has managed teams bigger than this one, so he'll feel like this is a demotion.' For me, after much soul searching, it became easier to reinvent myself and become a consultant who works on a particular project, on a contract basis. It engages me in new challenges, introduces me to new professionals, and keeps my skills honed. It is not full-time employment; it doesn't come with benefits; and after one project is completed, I need to find another one. But I have come to accept that this is the new reality" (personal communication, June 25, 2014).

When older workers are fortunate enough to find re-employment, the compensation is usually not up to the level of their previous job (Van Horn, 2014). In a recent survey, 14% of the re-employed said the pay in their new job was less than half of what they earned in their previous job (Rampell, 2013).

Meanwhile, in a survey of people currently working who are 50 and older, 36 percent said they were concerned that they could lose their job in the next year (AARP, December 12, 2012). Not surprisingly, among those Baby Boomers ages 50 to 61 who are approaching the end of their working years, six-in-ten say they plan to postpone retirement (Cohn & Taylor, 2010).

Adding injury to insult, a Gallup study found that those who are unemployed for a long-term are more prone to suffering deep mental and emotional scars from the experience. The results showed quantifiable declines in their health, self-esteem and overall emotional well-being. Essentially, unemployed adults are twice as likely as full-time employed adults to be depressed (Brown & McGeeney, 2013).

Echoing these findings, a new study demonstrates that Americans who have lost their jobs have much higher levels of depression in the United States than in Europe (Riumallo-Herl, Basu, Stuckler, Courtin, & Avedano, 2014). While the “Great Recession” of 2008 caused significant job loss in both Europe and the USA, the study confirms that those losses had particularly strong consequences for older workers. Among persons aged 50-64, unemployment rates rose from 3.1% to 7.3% in the USA, and from 5.4% to 6.15% in the European Union’s 15 countries (Riumallo-Herl et al., 2014). Resultant income losses may have devastating consequences for the retirement plans of older workers, increase their risk of poverty in old age, and render them more vulnerable to depression, increased substance abuse and poorer health (Riumallo-Herl et al., 2014). The study looked at 38,356 individuals in a broad cross section of

industries, and distinguished reasons for job loss due to the worker's firm closing down, redundancy or mutual agreement. Most significantly, when job loss was due to plant closure, depressive symptom scores increased by 28.2% in the USA as compared to 7.5% in Europe (Riumallo-Herl et al., 2014).

A potential hypothesis is that the generosity of the European benefit system translates into more financial security and less depletion of individual wealth before retirement (Riumallo-Herl et al., 2014). As economies become more globalized and job transitions more common, policies that enable both societal and personal resilience will become increasingly important (Berkman, 2014).

To give a further sense of the size and scope of this phenomenon, allow the numbers to paint a picture: If the Boomers in the United States were a nation unto themselves, they would be the sixteenth most populous country in the world (Smith & Clurman, 2007). Each of those Boomers is hearing the unmistakable sound of a Grandfather Clock, ticking in the background. On January 1, 2011, the oldest Baby Boomers in the United States started turning 65. Since then, and for 19 years, about 8,000 more will cross that threshold on a daily basis. By 2030, when each and every Baby Boomer will have turned 65, fully 18% of the nation's population will be at least that age, according to Pew Research Center population projections. To give a perspective, today, just 13% of Americans are age 65 and older (Cohn & Taylor, 2010).

Against this backdrop, with numbers that are daunting, disheartening, and, for those stuck in the middle of it, seemingly insurmountable, where can Baby Boomers turn when they have lost their jobs? How can they find hope, meaning, and themselves again? How can they tap into their youthful optimism? Ironically, their experience plays against them (Van Horn, 2014). The experts have made it clear: If you are a Boomer, you are going to have a much more difficult

time than anyone else getting back in the job market if you lose your job (Van Horn, 2014). For those Boomers who have lost their jobs, and those who fear they might, that message echoes, like a drum beating in some long, haunting dream.

The job market, in general, has been severely hit by both the recession and globalization. Against that backdrop, Baby Boomers are keenly aware that they are easy and attractive targets if layoffs are needed, since their salaries tend to be higher than those of younger workers (Tugend, 2013).

Even as they try do all the things they have been instructed to do – networking, improving their computer skills, finding their passion and turning it into a new opportunity – many struggle with the question of whether their working life, as they once knew it, is essentially over (Tugend, 2013).

Of course, it must be kept in mind that not every unemployed Baby Boomer is on the same footing. Some need to find another job, any job, quickly, in order to survive. Others have the resources to spend more time looking for a job that might bring the salary or status they are seeking.

For each of them, advice and perspective is craved.

Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs late in their careers may feel like they are facing the future without a clear course and lacking a compass. It is certainly not a situation for which they were prepared. They were raised believing that, for them, Maslow's basic needs of survival and safety would be fulfilled; no question, a basic assumption. Through childhood, adolescence, young adulthood and middle-age, they never had to question or look back to wonder if their survival and safety needs were or would be met. They knew they were covered. Baby Boomers

were raised with the fundamental belief that the economy was on their side, and all they needed to do was find their way to pursue something more meaningful.

Now, however, having lost their jobs and not sure where to turn, so many large questions loom. Not the least of which are: What in the world just happened? How could this happen to them? Why did this happen? Could they have done something different? What are they supposed to learn from this experience? Were they even pursuing the right path? And did they, up to this point, find that *something* more meaningful that they were looking for?

How can someone from a generation that entered the labor market amid full employment, at a time when middle-class jobs were multiplying rapidly (Roberts, 2012), and is now faced with being jobless, keep him or herself positive?

There is a clear need to help unemployed Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs to find their way in a manner that is much better than is being done now.

The relatively young field of Positive Psychology holds much promise for helping such Baby Boomers in their time of need. First and foremost, there is a natural synergy between the realistic optimism of Positive Psychology and the inherent belief system of the Baby Boomers – not the least of which is their fundamental belief in the future, and their focus on self-discovery, self-development and self-fulfillment (Smith & Clurman, 2007).

As a result of this natural synergy, I believe, through the lens, questions, and interventions of Positive Psychology, Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs may be able to find a new meaning and sense of purpose.

While I will be focusing on the positive, an equally important message that needs to be underscored is that being positive is not about ignoring or, in any way, downplaying the negative (Pawelski, 2013). Rather, being positive is about incorporating all aspects of one's life – positive,

negative, and everything in between – into a world-view, and enhancing it with just a little more light. By being open, self-reflective, engaged in improving and aware of how one is showing up, Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs can find resources inside of themselves that they may not have been aware of, and, in the fullness of that experience, they can become “better versions” of themselves (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013).

Through that positive lens, I will explore many questions, and consider several interventions that can help Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs to find their way.

For a Baby Boomer who is going through this most difficult time, there is a barrage of questions that can overwhelm and haunt them. While the order of these questions may seem random, they may keep being repeated until acceptable answers are uncovered (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

For instance: Is it important, first, to fully experience the grief, anger, sadness (*all the negative emotions*) that come with this enormous sense of loss? Must the pain from the past be felt fully in order to be released? And, if so, for how long?

Then, what can they do to become positive about the present and the future? How can they regain a sense of direction, purpose, security and identity?

In addition, if they over-identified with their previous job, how can they now search for their true identity?

How can they fortify their resilience? Buoy their optimism? As they try to determine what to do next, how can they find the right balance between realism and optimism?

How can they identify their inherent strengths? Develop ways to reflect more deeply? Craft new options that draw upon their strengths?

They may also want to consider: What would a new job look like that played to their strengths?

Other questions that might concern them are: If they are not naturally outgoing, how can they start genuinely connecting with people who can help them? Are they open to redefining themselves? To truly finding themselves? To discovering new possibilities? To discovering a new sense of purpose and meaning?

These are some of the questions that will be explored in this Capstone, as, through evidence-based research, I seek to provide hope, solace, insights and direction to help Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs to find themselves again.

In the following pages, I will explore these and other issues, as well as positive approaches for Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs and are looking to find their way. In the next section of this paper, I will discuss some of the background, insights and interventions that have been developed to increase a positive outlook in evidence-based positive psychology. I will then delve into the sense of loss (of identity, purpose, security and meaning) that comes when a Baby Boomer loses his or her job. Then I will explore how some of the evidence-based interventions from positive psychology could be woven together to create a solid sense of optimism and resilience for Boomers who feel they are facing one of their most daunting challenges, at a time in their lives when they may have felt ready to start coasting, just a little.

It is worth noting that as President John F. Kennedy, someone who redefined goals and inspired the generation of Baby Boomers with his vision of having an American walk on the moon, said, “When written in Chinese the word crisis is composed of two characters. One represents danger, and the other represents opportunity” (Kennedy, 1959).

In the closing section, I will propose that by facing their dangers, Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs and are seeking to find themselves may discover new opportunities, which they had never before considered.

What Does It Mean To Be Positive?

The opportunities for applying the insights and interventions of positive psychology to individuals who are seeking to find deeper connections with themselves and others are wide-ranging, far-reaching, deep, meaningful and unlimited.

Positive psychology is essentially an umbrella term for theories and research about what makes life most worth living (Park, Peterson, & Seligman, 2004). The fledgling field of positive psychology debuted when Martin Seligman gave his inaugural address as president of the American Psychological Association, as the new century was dawning. He contended that, while the notable accomplishments of psychology, including alleviating mental illness, are vital and extremely important; the field of psychology should also be, at least, equally focused on enhancing the positive (Seligman, 1999). Now in its teenage years, the new science of positive psychology, which Seligman and his colleagues spearheaded, focuses on building the most positive qualities of individuals, groups, organizations and societies; and seeks to discover what makes life most worth living (Seligman, 2011). The new doors this movement is opening can lead to countless promising possibilities for those who are seeking and committed to experiencing more positive emotions and are engaged in finding meaning, developing deeper relationships, and achieving their goals (Seligman, 2011).

Seligman and his colleagues, of course, did not emerge out of thin air. They built their theories and practices on the shoulders of many pioneers, starting with Abraham Maslow and

Carl Rogers, both of whom were integral to what became known as the Human Potential Movement. Maslow and Rogers offered a counterpoint to Freud (1977) and Skinner (1972), both of whom were more focused on diminishing what was negative, as opposed to enhancing what was positive. Maslow (1954) theorized that once our basic needs are met (food and shelter), we are driven to self-actualize – i.e. to fulfill our potential and achieve the highest level of 'human-beingness' we can. Rogers (1961) agreed with the main assumptions of Maslow, adding that to reach our highest potential, we need an environment that provides genuineness (openness and self-disclosure), acceptance (being received with unconditional positive regard), and empathy (being listened to and understood).

With this pioneering work blazing their trail, Seligman and his colleagues sought to strengthen the foundation of the Human Potential Movement by adding an empirical level to the new science of positive psychology (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). The new researchers were particularly influenced by the work of Aaron Beck (Beck, 1996) and Albert Ellis (Ellis & Dryden, 1987).

Beck, the founder of cognitive therapy, began helping depressed patients identify and evaluate their thought patterns, and, in doing so, enabled them to think more realistically, which led them to feeling better emotionally and functioning more effectively (Hirtz, 1999).

Complementing Beck's work, Ellis developed Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy, an approach in which the therapist played an active role in helping the client understand how his or her personal philosophy contained beliefs that may be self-defeating and contributing to their own emotional pain (Hirtz, 1999). Beck and Ellis's work became fundamental to positive psychology because they were able to demonstrate that by changing our beliefs about ourselves, we could

change our emotional responses; directly leading to changes in how we respond to positive and negative events in our lives (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

Building upon this foundation, one of Seligman's breakthrough insights was that we each bring our own explanatory style – essentially, how we explain to ourselves why positive or negative events happen. He was able to categorize these as permanent (does not change), pervasive (always happening) and personal (you have something to do with it) (Seligman, 1990). Most significantly, he was able to identify the attributes that distinguish optimistic individuals and demonstrate how individuals with a pessimistic style could learn to be optimistic by consciously changing their internal and external views about negative and positive events. (Peterson, 2000).

How did Seligman propose that people could become more optimistic?

Here's a little test:

How do you view negative things that happen? Are they happening to you? To everyone?

Can you change them?

Pessimists tend to view negative things that happen as something they inadvertently caused, and are just the way things are (Seligman, 1990.) Optimists, however, typically view negative events as something rare that will pass, nothing personal. Meanwhile, if something positive happens, a pessimist will view it as just an unexpected coincidence. Optimists, on the other hand, will view a positive event as something they helped to make happen, and will be able to affect in the future. In both cases, pessimists and optimists receive what they believe.

By becoming more self-aware of how they are responding to negative and positive events, Seligman demonstrated how pessimists could become more optimistic by distracting, disputing and distancing themselves from their negative beliefs (Seligman, 1990).

Confirming this, researchers have found that what people believe (or think) drives the way they feel and, therefore, how they act (Reivich & Shatté, 2014). This helps explain why people can respond very differently to negative and positive events. What is most important to understand is that it is not the situation that causes our feelings and behaviors; it is our beliefs which cause us to interpret events a particular way. Learning how our beliefs about (for instance) loss, danger or trespassing can lead to certain thinking traps (such as jumping to conclusions, tunnel vision or personalizing) can go a long way toward helping us understand how we can change certain patterns in our life; thereby becoming less reactive and more resilient (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

A New Field Comes To Light

Against this backdrop, central to the development of positive psychology was the gaining of a deeper understanding of the characteristics that distinguish each of us, and how we can enhance them. Just as the new field was being born, Seligman and Csikszentmihalyi called for massive research on human strengths, so that practitioners could focus on amplifying strengths, rather than repairing weaknesses of their clients (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Accepting this daunting challenge, Christopher Peterson and Martin Seligman developed a comprehensive handbook, which became a central reference point for understanding the 24 character strengths that imbue people throughout the world (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). They categorized these strengths as predominantly stable, universal personality traits that are expressed through our thoughts, feelings and actions (Niemiec, 2013).

Their extensive research, across cultures, religions and time, was guided by two questions. The first question was: Do some strengths show a stronger link to life satisfaction than

others? They sought every possible perspective, going back to Aristotle (1962), who underscored practical wisdom as the highest virtue; Confucius (1992), who highlighted benevolence; Aquinas (1989), who stressed faith, hope and charity; and Comte-Sponville (2002), who emphasized love. While they found that in most belief systems it is more common than not for a master character strength or virtue to organize the others and adjudicate conflicts among them, they could not agree upon the most fulfilling of the character strengths, leaving that final answer, if there is one, for empirical data to clarify (Park et al., 2004).

The second question guiding them was: Can character strengths, when taken to an extreme, diminish well-being? (Park et al., 2004). The notion that too much of a good thing is *not* a good thing was voiced as early as Aristotle (1962) in his doctrine of the mean. While, again, leaving the ultimate answer to research yet-to-be-undertaken, they postulated that the benefits may tail off at the extreme ends of each strength (Park et al., 2004); where, for instance, someone with too much bravery could become foolhardy, or too much love-of-learning might become pedantic, or too much humor may become a buffoon. For the most part, however, they concluded that more of any signature strength is better. In other words, the more we express our strengths, the more of ourselves we become. Interestingly, in one study, they did find that hope, zest, gratitude, love and curiosity were substantially related to life satisfaction; whereas modesty was the least fulfilling character strength (Park et al., 2004).

Once the 24 character strengths were agreed to and organized under six virtues, an assessment was developed, which has become known as the VIA Survey. Created under the direction of Seligman and Peterson, this self-assessment is regarded as a central tool of positive psychology, and has been used in hundreds of research studies and taken by over 2.6 million people in over 190 countries (www.viacharacter.org). The results from this assessment provide

each individual with a list of his or her five top signature strengths – those qualities that provide us with a sense of ownership and authenticity when we display them (Seligman, 2011). The ultimate goal of those who developed the VIA Survey is to help individuals become more aware of their signature strengths, reflecting on how they have used them, currently use them, and might use them in the future in ways that may have been previously unimagined (Niemi, 2013).

What has been suggested is a three-stage “Aware, Explore, Apply” model when working with people on their strengths (Niemi, 2013). Research suggests that fewer than one-out-of-three people have a meaningful understanding of their strengths (Wood, Linley, Maltby, Kashdan, & Hurling, 2010). So the first step is to help an individual become aware of his or her signature strengths; then to help them explore their strengths and realize how they have used them to succeed in the past; then, ultimately, to develop a plan for using their particular strengths to become “more of themselves” in the future (Niemi, 2013).

Most encouraging to the importance of developing one’s signature strengths was the finding that while heredity (50%) and circumstances (10%) can predispose us to the majority of the traits we possess, we can still, through our intentions and the right interventions, alter 40 percent of the ways in which we feel, understand and express ourselves (Lyubomirsky, 2008). While it is important to note that her methodology for arriving at these exact numbers has been called into question, the overall premise holds. What is most important from these findings is that within that approximately “40 percent” is where real differences can be made, and where meaningful opportunities for positive psychology abound.

For instance, by consciously expressing the unique blend of our top five strengths, which highlight who we are *at our best* (Peterson & Seligman, 2004), we can discover new approaches

to believe in ourselves and tap into our potential in ways that we may have never previously considered (Niemiec, 2013).

It is important to underscore, however that research has demonstrated that there is no one right answer for each of us to increase our well-being in every situation. For each of us who has the will, we need to find our own way (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Still, with the recognition that we can change, in significant ways, *if there is a will and a way* (Lyubomirsky, 2008), positive psychologists set about creating additional interventions to help us see that our glass is not just half full; but we have, and are surrounded by, resources to make it overflow.

Riding in parallel with this finding, research has demonstrated that being positive actually changes how our minds work. Positivity does not just change the contents of our minds, trading negative thoughts for much better ones; it also changes the scope and boundaries of our minds, widening the span of possibilities that we see (Fredrickson, 2009). Our positive emotions (joy, gratitude, serenity, interest, hope, pride, amusement, inspiration, awe and love), when shared with others, broaden our ideas about what is possible, opening our hearts and minds, making us more receptive and creative. Over time, this expanded awareness also builds our personal assets, abilities, knowledge, relationships, skills and resources, allowing us to see both the forest and the trees (Fredrickson, 2009).

This brings us back to the core beliefs and principles of positive psychology. Interestingly the founder of positive psychology admitted in a classroom discussion at the University of Pennsylvania, “I do not have a good definition of ‘flourishing.’ I have the elements, but I do not have a formula” (Seligman, MAPP class lecture, 2014). In the same class, he also mentioned that positive psychology was galvanized when he took a select group of like-minded academic researchers to Akumal, Mexico, where he rented a house from The Grateful Dead. There in

January of 1999, they crafted the Positive Psychology Manifesto, which defined positive psychology as the scientific study of optimal human functioning

(<http://www.ppc.sas.upenn.edu/akumalmanifesto.htm>).

Ever evolving, in his most recent book, *Flourish*, Seligman reviews and criticizes his earlier theory of happiness, which had served as the basis for the positive psychology movement (Seligman, 2011). He shifted his focus to *well-being* from *happiness*, which he writes, is a word that he now *actually detests* (Seligman, 2011). In *Authentic Happiness*, he posited that happiness could be analyzed into three different elements that we choose for their own intrinsic sake: positive emotion, engagement and meaning (Seligman, 2011). Positive emotion he describes as what we feel: pleasure, rapture, ecstasy, warmth, comfort, and the like. Engagement he describes as *flow*: being one with the moment, time stopping, and the loss of self-consciousness during an absorbing activity (Csikszentmihalyi, 2000). Meaning he describes as belonging to and believing in something that is bigger than yourself (Seligman, 2011).

He came to realize that some things were missing, specifically: accomplishment and positive relationships. This expanded view of positive psychology (exchanging happiness for flourishing), recognizes that accomplishment of a particular goal, when pursued because of an intrinsic desire, can be fundamental to our well-being. In addition, he recognized that positive relationships are vital to obtaining, sharing and maintaining our sense of flourishing. As he notes, very little that is positive is solitary. When was the last time you laughed uproariously by yourself. As with most everything that is positive in life, it is multiplied by being shared with others for whom we care deeply (Seligman, 2011).

In his evolving theory, which Seligman identified by the mnemonic PERMA (*Positive emotion; Engagement, Relationships, Meaning and Accomplishment*), he offers five universal

precepts, which, together, can guide us on a path in which we are living our lives in such a way that the doors of flourishing can be knocked upon and we will be received with open arms.

By engaging us in becoming more self-aware and tapping into our strengths, positive psychology holds enormous promise for helping each of us to become more resilient and optimistic – in the best of times as well as the worst of times. If we are positive, intent, aware and committed, change can kick into high gear (Lyubomirsky, 2008). Ultimately, the underlying message of positive psychology is that the way we view life can make a huge difference to ourselves, to those around us, and, sometimes, to the entire world (Seligman, 2011).

Boom, Boom, Boom

Can some of the insights and interventions of positive psychology help Baby Boomers redefine themselves after they have been “downsized,” “offered a package,” or summarily “let go” from their jobs?

As the reality of losing a job hits a Baby Boomer like a thunderclap, harsh and loud, spiraling down, is there a positive way to go through the feelings of disbelief, anger and sadness that pervade? As a Boomer feels, perhaps for the first time, a complete loss of direction, purpose and identity, how can he or she find a way to be positive? Particularly with that thunderclap still echoing.

As 8,000 Baby Boomers turn 60 each day for the next ten years, this question takes on enormous proportions – on individual and societal levels. How many will hear that loud, harsh thunderclap? As companies continue to merge or downsize, seeking “economies of scale,” Baby Boomers know they are likely targets for layoffs, since their salaries tend to be higher than those of younger workers (Tugend, 2013).

Amid these seismic cultural transformations, many Baby Boomers are finding themselves caught between a rock and a hard spot, not sure where to turn (Roberts, 2012).

How can individuals who never needed rose-colored glasses to believe that the future would be bright come to terms with the loss of their livelihood (Roberts, 2012), and keep themselves positive while facing seemingly insurmountable odds? How can Baby Boomers move positively through this life-altering transition and find themselves anew? How can they tap into their strengths, optimism and resilience and find – and redefine – themselves in ways that will bring new meaning to their lives? How can they come to believe that this next unknown phase of their life could actually be their best?

You Have To Be Lost, Before You Can Be Found

At first, losing a job can feel like losing yourself (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). How does it feel? Ironically, in 1965, Bob Dylan presaged what many Baby Boomers are now going through, when he wrote *Like a Rolling Stone*, a song exploring the loss of innocence and the harshness of experience, which Rolling Stone magazine crowned the greatest song of all time (May 31, 2011). In that song, myths, props and former beliefs crumble to reveal a draining reality: *You’re invisible now...like a complete unknown, like a rolling stone...how does it feel?* (Dylan, 1965).

That feeling of loss can be pervasive and all-consuming, thunderously crashing down on a newly-unemployed Baby Boomer, leaving a inescapable sense of loss of direction, purpose, security and identity (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). For a Baby Boomer who may feel lost, it is valuable to recognize that positive and negative emotions can be two sides of the same coin, inextricably fused and mutually informative. It is often out of negative experiences

that positive appraisals and meanings evolve. Our positive and negative emotions are in a continual and evolving relationship (Fineman, 2006).

It may also help Baby Boomers who are experiencing this unfamiliar sense of loss, flux and uncertainty to realize that they have entered a realm known as a “moratorium” (Erikson, 1956). In this psychosocial moratorium, they will start to actively explore different identities, as their current one has been challenged. Without a definite commitment, with more questions than they thought possible, and not sure which way is north, they will start to edge their way back into the world, seeking, through free role experimentation, to find a new niche in society (Erikson, 1956). In this ambiguous state, full of doubt, they will be intensively analyzing and exploring different ways of looking at themselves. Unclear of their role in life, and not certain they know themselves like they did before, recently-unemployed Baby Boomers may likely experience some level of an *identity crisis*, a term that Erik Erikson (1970) coined, believing it was one of the most crucial conflicts individuals face in their development. While Erikson’s theories about identity focused on adolescents, ultimately, for Baby Boomers who are feeling an enormous sense of loss of self, successfully realigning their identities will be much more important to them than just finding another job (Erikson, 1970). It will be equally important for Baby Boomers during this transitional time to recognize that “many adults feel that their worth as people consists entirely in *what they are doing*, or in *what they are going to do next*, and not in who they are” (Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 85). Being unsure of what they are doing *now and next*, it will be helpful for Baby Boomers who have just lost their jobs, along with a sense of themselves, to realize that they are in a provisional state of moratorium in which their goal is “to start another life and try out alternate roads to integrity” (Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 105).

For Baby Boomers who find themselves in this moratorium, the good news is that this is not their first time they will be facing an identity crisis. According to Dan Tomasulo, Ph. D., “They will have the unique benefit of experience and perspective – knowing what worked and what did not work when they went through their identity crisis as adolescents” (personal communication, June 23, 2014). Perhaps they foreclosed, which Tomasulo described as “having dodged their identity crisis by just grabbing hold of something nearby – such as going into the family business or getting married.” Or they may have emerged successfully from their previous identity crisis with a strong sense of confidence and belief in the future. “Whichever path they took as adolescents, if they are reflective and self-aware now, their lessons from the past can better prepare them to move into this next layer of their identity” (personal communication, June 23, 2014). He added, “This time around, perhaps they will be thinking, ‘Let me pursue something that I am good at, or something I’ve always wanted to do, or something that is truly important’” (personal communication, June 23, 2014).

Interestingly, this second identity crisis for Baby Boomers, is occurring during a stage that Erikson identified as *Generativity vs. Stagnation* in which adults are seeking to create a positive change that will benefit other people, and, ideally, outlast themselves – otherwise, they will feel an empty sense of shallow (Erikson, 1959/1980).

So, during this psychosocial moratorium in which Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs are trying to find themselves, they may go in one of two completely different directions. If they are caught unaware and unprepared, this moratorium can leave them feeling lost, alone and rudderless, in a timeless whirl. However, if they are prepared, aware of the stages they need to traverse, understand the strengths that distinguish them, know how to fortify themselves with

optimism and resilience, and have a positive support network, they can realign their personal passions with a mission and purpose that may give their lives new meaning.

For Brendan, (who requested his story be told anonymously) this moratorium came out of the blue. He recalls looking up just after 9:00 A.M. and seeing the second plane fly into the South Tower of the World Trade Center. Brendan and everyone around him started moving in different directions, as a thin layer of soot started falling on them, like an eerie rain. Brendan, who had been a securities trader with a firm across the street from the World Trade Center, started moving with a crowd toward the Hudson River, hoping to walk across the George Washington Bridge. “There was a feeling of connectedness,” he recalled. “If anyone had a cell signal, they didn’t hesitate to loan their phone to anyone nearby, so they could call and tell someone they loved that they were OK. We were all moving in the same direction, in it together” (personal conversation, May 29, 2014).

Seven years later, when the economy faltered and Brendan was among nearly 1,000 traders in his firm to be let go, that feeling of connectedness and being in it together vanished. “One day we were all doing exceptionally well. The next day it was all over,” he said. Over the course of the next three years, Brendan said, he slowly sank into a deep depression. “At first, I thought I’d find work easily enough,” he said. “But all of us were in the same boat. All of my connections, all of my experience, none of it seemed to matter.” People started avoiding his calls. They knew why he was reaching out, and, he assumes, they felt bad that they couldn’t help. “I was lost, and nowhere to be found,” he said. “My wife and I went through our savings, tapped into my 401k. We had our mortgage, two daughters in college, and I just saw everything going down, down, down.”

So, he began driving for a limousine service, feeling as if he was going nowhere. Then, as he slowly emerged from the depths of his depression, one of his passengers started talking about what Brendan saw as a way to reinvent himself. That voice was what he needed to hear. He is now just a few credits shy of getting a teaching certificate, so that he can teach high school math in the city. “I feel as if I am emerging from a long, dark tunnel.” Sighing, he said, “And I’m coming out the other side with real meaning and purpose” (personal conversation, May 29, 2014).

Faced with such a life-changing event as a job loss late in one’s career, after the initial shock, there is often an onslaught of negative thoughts and emotions, many of which are free floating, often in overlapping stages, including: disbelief, denial, anger, bargaining, pain, guilt, sadness, depression, then, finally, acceptance (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007). The thoughts and emotions that arise from this loss need to be recognized, felt and accepted in order to push through them and feel a renewed sense of hope about the future (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

Each of these thoughts and feelings are important to the recovery process.

For instance, the first stage of grieving helps an individual survive the loss. In this stage, the world becomes meaningless and overwhelming. The individual becomes numb, in a state of shock and denial, wondering how they can possibly go on. There is a grace in denial. It is nature’s way of letting in only as much as an individual can handle (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007). People often find themselves telling the story of their loss over and over, which is one way that the mind deals with trauma. After the denial starts to recede, individuals experiencing an enormous loss often turn inward, beginning to search for understanding (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

As the individual becomes stronger and the denial starts to fade, all the feelings that were being denied begin to surface, not the least of which is anger. Anger does not have to be logical or valid. An individual may feel angry that he or she did not see this coming; or they may feel angry with a particular person; or at the way their dismissal was handled. The more he or she feels the anger, the more it will begin to dissipate. There are many other emotions under the anger, which will arise over time, but anger is the emotion most individuals are used to managing (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

Bargaining helps the individual who has experienced a loss move from one state to another. It can be a way station that gives the individual's psyche the time needed to adjust. This is where someone may intellectually explore all those "what if" and "if only" statements; eventually realizing there is nothing that can be done to change the situation (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

That's when the attention of the individual who is grieving his or her loss has nowhere to go but the present. Empty feelings present themselves, and grief enters on a deeper level than was ever imagined. The individual may withdraw from life, left in a fog of intense sadness, wondering, perhaps, if there is any point in going on. In grief, depression is a way for nature to keep us protected by shutting down the nervous system so that we can adapt to something we feel we cannot handle. If we allow ourselves to experience depression, under most circumstances, it will leave as soon as it has served its purpose; though, as we get stronger, it may return from time-to-time (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

The stages of denial, anger, bargaining and depression lead to an eventual acceptance. Acceptance does not mean that the individual is all right with what happened. This stage is about accepting the reality, so he or she can learn to live with it and move on. This is where the

individual starts the process of reintegration, trying to put back the pieces that have been torn asunder. Acceptance is a process that is experienced, not a final stage with an end point. It is where, little by little, the individual who has sustained a serious loss begins to withdraw his or her energy from the loss and begin to invest that energy in a new life (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

This grief model provides insights into how one can let go of the past and move forward in a changed world (Bonanno & Kaltman, 1999). The emotional and psychological responses that most people experience when faced with a life-changing loss do not always occur in this particular chronology, and not everyone experiences all of them (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

What is important, in order to get through the grieving process, though, is to experience one's emotions and thoughts fully; and, ideally, to be able to share them with someone with whom the individual trusts. Through this process, the new reality can be accepted and new possibilities can be positively considered (Kübler-Ross & Kessler, 2007).

Individuals typically move through this grieving process in a dynamic interplay: at times in a "loss orientation," consumed with trying to sort through "*who I am* in relation to the loss;" at other times in a "restoration orientation," trying to understand "*who I am* in a post-loss world" (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014).

Emotions, understandably, run high because of the onslaught of identity-related discrepancies, which implicate the individual's sense of self. As a result, individuals enter the loss orientation phase with more than simply the goal of determining who they are in regard to the loss they have experienced; they are also carrying the negative baggage of loss-related emotions, which adds an extra unwelcomed layer of complication and confusion (Conroy & O'Leary-Kelly, 2014).

Finding Yourself – Finding Your Story

This stage of sense-making and emotion regulation is best seen as a necessary transition period, known as liminality (the condition of being betwixt and between), during which the newly-unemployed Baby Boomers may incubate, determining who they were and who they are becoming (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Understandably, some people have the benefit of more time than others for this transition period. However collapsed it needs to be, this process of sense-making and emotion regulation is particularly important for individuals who, when previously asked who they were would answer by describing their job (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). For many Baby Boomers, their previous job was central to their identity, which they wore like a tattoo. In those instances, letting go of the past is vital to finding their future.

Baby Boomers who do not successfully traverse this period of transition run the risk of experiencing ongoing identity instability in which they will be cognitively and emotionally consumed by the loss, stagnating in their inability to let go of their old self and embrace their new and changed self (Dutton et al., 2010).

Meanwhile, the most essential aspect of resolving loss is the development of an understanding of the event and its implications (Frankl, 1959/1984). Striving to find meaning in one’s life is a primary motivational force. Each of us is *pulled to detect* our own meaning, our purpose, the reason we are here (Frankl, 1959/1984).

So, while the newly-unemployed Baby Boomers are going through the necessary stages of grieving, simultaneously they will be searching to find new meaning in their lives.

Sociological research on finding meaning after a significant loss (Kennett-Hensel, Sneath, & Lacey, 2012) depicts three phases: separation (detaching from the old sense of self),

transition (resolving ambiguity), and reincorporation (establishing a new sense of self). In the separation phase, individuals disassociate from their former self and start to construct a new identity (Ashforth, 2001). The transition phase is where individuals create identity narratives that they socially test and validate (Ibarra & Lineback, 2005). Research on the transition phase underscores that a key challenge is to create an “ex-role” (Ashforth, 2001), as well as a new credible and aspirational story about who the individual is becoming (Ibarra, 1999). Finally, research speaks to the reincorporation phase as the anticipated state that will exist when individuals successfully create a new identity in which the former identity is incorporated with the new identity, providing a coherent sense of self, allowing for growth and development (Ashforth, 2001).

Researchers (Pennebaker, 1997) suggest that writing continuously for fifteen minutes a day for several days can start to make sense out of loss. It is suggested not to edit or censor oneself, not to worry about grammar or sentence structure, just to keep writing. Individuals are advised to write about what happened, how they feel about it, and *why* they feel that way. The crucial thing is to get one’s thoughts and feelings out without imposing any order on them, but in such a way that after a few days, some order is likely to emerge on its own. The two questions that the writer is seeking to answer are: Why did this happen? And what good might I derive from it?

Building a valid loss-related identity narrative (Ibarra, 2003) is particularly important for individuals, so that they can make sense of what happened and cogently explain to themselves and others why the changes occurred. *Making sense* refers to the practice of putting a frame around experience: interpreting what is happening today, reinterpreting past events, and creating compelling stories that link the two (Weick, 1979). What Baby Boomers who feel they have lost

part of themselves need is a lucid story of the lost self that they can live with and into (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). Such narratives can help settle negative emotions that remain following a loss, so individuals can move toward a stable future (Ibarra & Lineback 2005). These self-narratives – stories that make a point about the narrator – help people revise and reconstruct their identities during work role transitions (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Equally important, a comprehensive understanding of the past self is vital to the construction of future selves as individuals try to create continuity throughout their life story (McAdams, 1993). For individuals who have endured a significant loss, reframing their story enables them to recognize that they are not victims at all but individuals who can overcome adversity and become inspiring. Such stories can provide the inspiration for individuals to create their own futures (George, 2007).

Telling a good story helps people create meaning (McAdams, 1993). Scholars concur that self-narratives are both expressive of and constitutive of identity (Bruner, 1990). Identity has even been defined as the internalized and evolving story that results from a person’s selective appropriation of the past, present and future (McAdams, 1999). In many ways, a successful transition involves the individual crafting a compelling new story about who they are, where they are going and how they intend to get there.

During this transition, identity work is required to sustain feelings of authenticity, and to fashion a ‘culturally appropriate self’ complete with stories deemed fitting to a new professional group or community (Ibarra, 2003). Identity work has been defined as people’s engagement in forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising their identities (Snow & Anderson, 1987). This is where stories help people articulate provisional selves, link the past and the future into a harmonious, continuous sense of self, and enlist others to lend social reality to the desired changes (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). Conversely, emotional discomfort arises when people are

unable to draw a continuous link between their old and new selves, leaving them feeling inauthentic or devoid of an enduring sense of self (Ibarra, 1999).

In crafting a new self-narrative, Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs will want to follow the formula of a classic plot, containing three acts (McAdams, 1993). The first “act” typically poses a dilemma. The middle concerns the protagonist’s journey, where the hero spends a period of time lost, wondering in the wilderness (Campbell, 1956). This middle act then typically leads to a turning point about major role transitions. Endings, then, resolve the tension built up in the middle (Ibarra, 2003).

The narrator of the story, the protagonist, is there to account for any apparent discontinuity in the story, explaining the life change in a way that embodies the ideal self as an agent of change, in control of life occurrences and impervious to obstacles and constraints (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010). By way of example, the narrator might explain the life change by saying, “While I enjoyed what I was doing and was comfortable financially, this change has allowed me to explore what is most meaningful to me.” While it is most important for the story to be authentic, it becomes most effective when honed and practiced in front of a receptive audience (Ibarra & Barbulescu, 2010).

In this way, Baby Boomers seeking to redefine themselves will need to revise their stories until they convincingly and compellingly link their old and new selves (Ibarra, 2003). Until those old and new selves are linked, the individual will view him or herself, and come across to others, as unfocused. To be compelling, the story needs to explain why the individual is reinventing him or herself, who they are becoming, and how they plan to get there. Then, as insights are gained and events unfold, the story will continue to evolve (Ibarra, 2003).

Meanwhile, in an unkind twist of fate, it is worth noting that Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs, and therefore are having their identity shaken to the core, are coping with an issue that Erik Erikson identified as classically being resolved in adolescence (Erikson, 1959/1980). While the Boomers considered themselves to be *Forever Young*, the idea of repeating the Identity versus Role Confusion Cycle of their teenage years was surely not what they were seeking. In Erikson's model, adolescents struggle to bridge early childhood stages with dominant images of adulthood, creating along the way an accruing sense of ego strength (Erikson, 1959/1980). Erikson points out that adolescents help one another through their discomfort by forming cliques and by stereotyping themselves, their ideals and their enemies – a fair warning for Baby Boomers who find themselves going through this stage again. Interestingly, Erikson also points out that for adolescents seeking to form their identity, democracies like America pose special problems in that “it insists on *self-made identities* ready to grasp many chances and ready to adjust to changing necessities of booms and busts” (Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 98). He offers a perspective for adolescents as well as Baby Boomers going through this difficult identity transition: “This is hard on many young Americans because their whole upbringing, and therefore the development of a healthy personality, depends on a certain degree of *choice*, and a certain conviction in freedom of *self-determination*” (Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 99). He also offers an unexpected caution that Baby Boomers who are now unexpectedly coming to terms with their identity may want to heed: “Any loss of a sense of identity exposes the individual to his own childhood conflicts” (Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 99). He offers another caution, which takes on a new meaning for Baby Boomers who, because they have lost their jobs are seeking a new sense of who they are: there is “the problem of trust to matters of adult faith;” as well as “the problem of autonomy to matters of adult independence” (Erikson, 1959/1980). For a generation that was

raised with the phrase, “Don’t trust anyone over thirty,” Erikson’s disquieting thought takes on a new meaning. He also offered a fundamental concern that looms large today for Baby Boomers who need to find themselves anew: “In a culture...pervaded with the value of being self-made, a special danger ensues from the idea of a synthetic personality: as if you are what you can appear to be, or what you can buy” (Erikson, 1959/1980, p. 100).

It is little wonder that Baby Boomers who have recently lost their jobs are finding such a difficult time finding themselves. There is much at stake for them personally – in a culture that is in an unclear transition. And those who are caught in the middle are given little guidance.

It is the experience and processing of emotions during this transitional period that determines whether identity loss will lead a Baby Boomer to turn inward and lose connections with the social world; miss growth opportunities; or recognize a renewed sense of authenticity and meaning (Conroy & O’Leary-Kelly, 2014). This is where, I believe, the promise of positive psychology holds enormous promise.

Ultimately, the process of defining oneself positively is an important means of empowerment and liberation that can enable an individual to take action (Dutton, Roberts, & Bednar, 2010). During such times, it is important to remember that “Everything can be taken from...(an individual) but one thing: the last of the human freedoms – to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way” (Frankl, 1984, p. 104).

Bringing The Past and Present to the Future

How do Baby Boomers who have just lost their jobs come to terms with their loss in a way that is most effective? How can they cope with all the negative thoughts and emotions that accompany that loss in a way that *is – or turns out to be –* positive?

In the final analysis, individuals are all motivated to make sense of negative life events in an effort to maintain their perceptions, beliefs and assumptions about what is important. Those significant events in their lives should have a meaning that they can understand (Davis, Nolen-Hoeksema, & Larson, 1998). To the extent that events that touch their lives do not make sense, they can be left feeling vulnerable and highly distressed, with little choice but to somehow try to find meaning by making sense of the event (McCann & Pearlman, 1990).

So, if near the end of one's career, an individual loses his or her job, through what appears to be nothing but the vagaries of the economy, or some company merging with another, or some other variable over which the individual does not have the slightest control, how can he or she make sense of what just happened? Work, as a life domain, is important for self-construction (Dutton et al., 2010). Most individuals will spend most of their adult lives at work. As it turns out, there is nothing that more preoccupies their lives. From the approximate age of 21 through 70, most people will not sleep as much, spend time with their families as much, eat as much, recreate, or rest as much as they work (Gini, 1998).

For Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs, it is important to understand what was lost: at the very best, on a day-to-day basis, they were involved in behaviors that contributed to their sense of identity, personal satisfaction and enjoyment, and added meaning to their lives (Wrzesniewski, Dutton, & Debebe, 2003). As a result, the importance of positivity in work-related identities becomes paramount. People often make positive evaluations of their personal identity at work – that is, their work-related traits, characteristics, and competencies that differentiate them as an individual (Rosenberg, 1979).

So the threat cannot be underestimated that can occur when an individual's self-definition is moved away from his or her strengths or virtues. Identity threats most often occur when there

are decrements in self-regard, often triggered by external perceptions (Dutton et al, 2010). Near the end of one's career, such a threat can have an enormous impact.

So how can Baby Boomers being dealt such a deck of cards persevere, and find themselves anew?

Painful events, such as the loss of one's job near the end of his or her career, can cause diverse and significant reactions. After such stressful occurrences, there is the risk of post-traumatic stress, along with the possibility of post-traumatic growth (Steven & Steven, 2010).

Post-traumatic stress is an anxiety disorder that can develop after exposure to one or more traumatic events. It is a severe and ongoing emotional reaction to an extreme psychological trauma, such as someone's death, a threat to life, serious physical injury, or threat to physical or psychological integrity (Steven & Steven, 2010).

Evidence has made it clear that the majority of people who experience traumatic events do not develop severe and chronic problems. Moreover qualitative clinical and research observations in the early 1990s began to document an unexpected finding: many survivors also reported positive changes in their lives (Stephen & Hefferon, 2013).

Post-traumatic growth is a phrase coined by two American researchers, Richard Tedeschi and Lawrence Calhoun (1996). Their research demonstrates that optimists are more likely than pessimists to be less distressed by adversity, to use more effective coping strategies, and to perceive benefits or report positive life changes following stressful life events (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

By way of a quick example of someone who grew through adversity, consider Michelle Rosado. She was seated at her desk on the 95th floor of Tower 2 of the World Trade Center when a loud crash shattered the windows in her office. The horrific experience of escaping the crush of

the falling towers turned her life around. “I wasn’t fully aware that my true ‘destiny’ ever existed until September 11th,” she said, “The shock and awe of the tragedy left me wondering if life would ever be the same again” (Gardner, 2009, p. 1). In the aftermath, she started opening her eyes to various ways of self-growth and improvement, including yoga and meditation. She has gone on to become a life coach, an author, a peace activist, and an inspiring speaker. Her convictions and voice gained strength, she says as she became aware of how enormously our negative thoughts impact our actions” (Gardner, 2009). While Michelle’s story of being a 9/11 survivor is incorporated into her overall message, she notes, “My intention is not to ever reflect on that day in a negative light. That would keep me living in the past and not developing an understanding of living in the present” (Gardner, 2009, p. 2). She adds that it is important to live in the present, focusing on what we can do today. “Many people create their current reality based on wallowing in disappointments from their past experiences or worrying about what they fear may lie ahead in the future – none of which can be controlled” (Gardner, 2009, p. 2).

Michelle’s experience of post-traumatic growth underscores that the benefits of being optimistic are substantial when facing a major crisis. It is certainly a message that Baby Boomers who have lost their job near the end of their career can take to heart.

That is encouraging, if you are an optimist. But what if you are not? And, even if you are naturally optimistic, how can you maintain your optimism when everything around you seems to be confirming that things are in fact getting worse? (Burke, 1986).

First of all, it is important to underscore that being positive is not about ignoring or downplaying the negative. Rather, being positive is about being keenly aware of everything that is going on, and incorporating that reality into our world view, while shedding just a little more light on the subject (Pawelski, 2014).

Negativity, in fact, is important. None of us can flourish without it. Even the happiest people cry when they lose someone they cherish; get angry by injustice and frightened by danger. Appropriate negativity keeps us grounded, real and honest (Fredrickson, 2009).

What we need to caution against, though, is ruminating, going over and over negative thoughts and feelings, examining them from every angle, getting stuck in an endless rut of questions, thus becoming overwhelmed and demoralized (Fredrickson, 2009).

Studies show that when people experience negative emotions, they selectively call to mind negative thoughts, which only add fuel to the fire of their negativity. Quickly, a chain of negative thoughts is created that are linked by their negative tone. Because negative emotions and narrowed, negative thoughts feed on each other, they can drag an individual down, sending positivity into a tailspin (Fredrickson, 2009). Seligman (2002) adds that one of the major symptoms of depression is self-absorption. Someone who is depressed thinks about how he or she feels excessively. Their low mood becomes very salient. Then, with that sadness comes ruminating, projecting that negative feeling into the future, and across all activities, which, in turn, amplifies the sadness (Seligman, 2002).

So, how can a Baby Boomer feel and accept the negative thoughts and emotions that arise from losing his or her job, as Kübler-Ross (2007) advises, without falling into the trap of ruminating? The balance is vitally important in order to maintain a positive approach toward finding new meaning when your world seems to be in tatters. On the one hand, being open to negativity is healthier than being closed off from it (Fredrickson, 2009). On the other hand, thinking too much about our negative thoughts can put us in a downward spiral. Ideally, we are seeking to accept our negative thoughts, without magnifying them (Fredrickson, 2009).

In his search for the source of learned helplessness responses, Seligman discovered that people's tendency to give up efforts to change bad outcomes was due to a predisposition to view bad outcomes as being caused by permanent, pervasive and personal circumstances (Schneider, 2001). An optimistic explanatory style, on the other hand, in which people tend to take credit for their successes and blame failures on situation-specific external factors (i.e., self-serving bias), has been associated with better outcomes in terms of health and achievement (Schneider, 2001).

Optimism and hope cause better resistance to depression when bad events strike (Seligman, 2002). To keep from spiraling down in a whirl of negative thoughts and feelings, though, it is essential to realize that our beliefs are just that – beliefs. They may or may not be facts (Seligman, 2002).

To keep from ruminating, there are two general ways to deal with pessimistic beliefs – distracting and disputing.

Distracting involves displacing pessimistic thoughts with a habit or favorite activity. A healthy distraction – such as going for a jog, meditating or practicing yoga – is an activity that literally takes one's mind off troubles. The goal is for an individual to find an activity that is challenging and engrossing, stretching one's skills and abilities. When individuals become so absorbed in what they are doing that time disappears, they may be experiencing a state called flow (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990). When in flow, totally absorbed and involved in the present moment, and unaware of themselves, Baby Boomers can find a healthy distraction, freeing themselves of some of the doubts and fears they may be experiencing as they seek to find a new future for themselves.

The second way to deal with pessimistic beliefs is to dispute them. For individuals who find themselves feeling down, anxious or angry, the message is for them to pause and reflect

upon what they are saying to themselves. Sometimes those beliefs will turn out to be accurate; when that is so, it is best to concentrate on ways that the situation can be altered. More often than not, however, they will find that their negative beliefs are distortions. In such cases, those beliefs need to be challenged – otherwise they can take hold and run one's emotional life. Negative beliefs, in particular, need to be challenged if they take the form of being permanent, pervasive or personal. For instance, does the individual believe that he or she has lost their job because of something permanent, which will never change? Such beliefs need to be challenged, and replaced with the understanding that what happened was unfortunate, but situational. Such thinking does not change what happened, but it can help those going through a tough time to realize that what happened is in that past; and that today is a new day, with new possibilities. Seligman (1990) believes that disputing negative thoughts and beliefs may be more effective in the long run than simply distracting oneself, because successfully disputed beliefs are less likely to recur when a similar situation presents itself again.

Learning how to think more optimistically in the face of adversity gives individuals a permanent skill to help achieve more, feel more positively about themselves and others, and to become healthier. By learning how to challenge the negative thoughts that may plague a Baby Boomer who has just lost his or her job, they can free themselves from dwelling in the dark shadows of depression. Seen in this light, optimism becomes a tool to help people realize their true potential (Seligman, 1990).

Can being overly-optimistic, though, lead to being unrealistic? Some researchers have cautioned about the dangers of optimistic illusions. For instance, cigarette smokers may avoid quitting by adopting self-serving biases that discount their personal susceptibility to the risks of smoking (Gibbons, Eggleston, & Benthin, 1997). In other research, the data says that when

considering positive emotions, more is better, up to a point; and that when considering negative emotions, less is better, down to a point (Fredrickson, 2013). In most instances, though, there may be an optimal margin of illusion that allows people to see themselves as slightly better than they really are, but does not typically lead to behaviors based on false assumptions (Baumeister, 1988).

In times of uncertainty, realistic optimism involves hoping for and working toward desired outcomes, coupled with a focus on opportunities to increase the likelihood of attaining personally meaningful goals (Schneider, 2001). This sense of realistic optimism is particularly important when the future is uncertain. In such instances, a realistic optimist might shoot for an “A,” but, when it happens, be pleased with a “B” (Schneider, 2001). When one’s hopes for performance are not completely met, realistic optimism involves accepting what cannot now be changed, rather than being critical or second-guessing one’s self. Focusing on the successful aspects of performance (even when success is modest) promotes positive affect, reduces self-doubt and helps to maintain motivation (McFarland & Ross, 1982).

Realistic optimism is particularly important when we are considering future goals and plans. Here, realistic positive thinking creates an overriding perspective on goal-striving or problem solving that depicts the situation as a challenge or an opportunity, rather than as a chore or a problem (Schneider, 2001). Such phrasing is very meaningful, since the term *problem* (with synonyms such as *predicament*, *obstacle* and *difficulty*) implies that the current state is negative and that actions must be successful to establish a satisfactory state. A *challenge*, on the other hand, implies an acceptable current state that offers potential opportunity for bringing about a beneficial change (Schneider, 2001). This framing can be quite powerful, as it has been shown to

influence willingness to take risks, as well as aspiration levels (Schneider, 1992). That is why, realistically, having a positive attitude is likely to pay off (Schneider, 2011).

A realistically optimistic attitude is certainly the lens through which an individual wants to view the world, and can be extremely helpful when the world seems to be providing a hard time. This is when one's resilience needs to kick into high gear. Resilience is the ability to persevere and adapt when things go awry (Masten, Cutuli, Herbers, & Reed, 2009). Resilience is particularly important when individuals are faced with a major setback, such as a lost job. Resilience is the quality that enables individuals to brush themselves off after getting knocked down and carry on with even more determination (Greenberg & Sweeney, 2006). Where an individual falls on the resilience curve – their natural reserve – affects their performance, their physical and mental health, and the quality of their relationships. Resilience is the basic ingredient to happiness and success (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

When life throws someone a major curve, how do they respond? Do they shut down? Or open up? Do they put their head down and just keep doing what they were doing before? A little harder? A little faster? Or do they look around and try to discover a new path? The difference has to do with their resilience (Greenberg & Sweeney, 2006).

We all know resilient people. They inspire us. They seem to soar in spite of the hardship and trauma they face (Reivich & Shatté, 2003). Resilient people demonstrate a unique approach toward dealing with situations that do not go their way. They feel the sting of being set back. They may even dwell on it and be a little self-critical. But then they muster their determination, shake off any negative feelings, and learn what they need to do to carry on. It is like a voice in the back of their heads says, "I'll show you," and then pushes them forward (Greenberg & Sweeney, 2006).

Resilience is not just toughness, though. Toughness is an aspect of resilience, certainly. It enables people to separate emotion from the negative consequences of difficult situations. But toughness can also create an armor that deflects emotion; and it can cut people off from many of the resources needed to bounce back. Most importantly, it can cut them off from the people around them. Resilience is about absorbing life's challenges, taking them in, then rebounding, having learned something about themselves, and, as a result, changed, so they can emerge even stronger than before (Greenberg & Sweeney, 2006).

People who are most resilient in the face of trauma display three primary characteristics that work in concert to protect them and hasten their recovery. They exhibit *a task-oriented coping style* – they take incremental, purposeful actions to deal with the adversity; as their actions show; they have *a deeply-held belief in their ability* to control the outcome of their lives; people who bounce back more quickly from trauma also know how to use their *connections to others* as a way to cope with their experience (Reivich & Shatté, 2003). This may help explain why some people are negatively affected by traumatic experiences, some are not fazed in ways that are measurable, and others grow in ways that are unexpected (Tedeschi & Calhoun, 1996).

The most salient individual characteristics related to resilience include cognitive skills and personality differences related to effective problem solving, self-regulation and adaptability to stress (Masten et al., 2009).

How individuals analyze events depends on thinking styles that they have learned over their lifetime, which operate reflexively, in knee-jerk fashion, when things do not go their way. Non-resilient thinking styles can lead them to cling to inaccurate beliefs about the world and to inappropriate problem-solving strategies that burn through emotional energy and valuable resilience resources (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

When a life-altering event, such as losing our job late in one's career, blows someone off course, his or her resilience can be taxed. Approaches to bouncing back from more minor setbacks may not work in such cases (Masten et al., 2009).

Fortunately, in such cases, with practice, resilience can be increased. There are several competencies that can be built to enhance resilience, including: emotional awareness, impulse control and empathy (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

Researchers (Beck, 1979) have found that the way individuals think drives the way they feel and, therefore, what they do. This helps explain why people can respond very differently to negative events. What is most important to understand is that it is not the adversity that causes individuals to feel or behave a certain way; it is their beliefs. The message for individuals is that by understanding that their beliefs can lead to certain consequences can go a long way toward helping them understand how they can change certain patterns in their life.

Insight is the first step to change. But it is not enough. An approach known as the ABC model, developed by Aaron Beck, the founder of cognitive therapy, helps individuals identify the true causes of their problems: then they can accurately assess where they have control to fix or recover from those situations. Through this approach, individuals can learn how to keep the implications of a problem in perspective and how to fight back against un-optimistic or non-resilient beliefs in real time (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

The foundation of the ABC model is built on the simple realization that each individual's emotions and behaviors are triggered not by events themselves but by how they interpret those events. So, in this ABC model, individuals come to identify the *Beliefs* that can rob them of their resilience. For it is not the *Activating event* itself, but their *Beliefs* about the event that trigger each of their responses (or the *Consequences*.) The goal is for each of us to understand how our

buttons get pushed. Then, the more we know about those buttons, the more we will know about ourselves – and be able to start responding differently to those situations in which we feel least resilient (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

Once individuals get clear about how their *activating events* – no matter how big or small – cause them to *believe* (or think) a certain way, then they can start to understand the connection between how their *beliefs (or thoughts)* lead to certain *consequences*. The point for everyone to realize is that it not the *activating event* itself that leads to a specific *consequence*; rather it is each of our *beliefs (or thoughts)* about the *activating event* that lead to certain results. What is most important about that realization is that everyone can change their *beliefs* about what is happening – and, therefore, the consequences. So, for instance, if someone *believes* that she has lost something because of an *activating event*, she will feel sad or withdrawn (*the consequence*). It is not the *activating event* itself that makes her feel sad or withdrawn. It is her *belief* that she has lost something that causes the *consequence* of her feeling sad or withdrawn. So if she can change her *belief* about the *activating event*, she will change the way she feels. Likewise, if an individual *believes* that he is in danger because of an *activating event*, then, as a *consequence*, he will feel anxiety or agitated. By changing his *belief* (or thoughts) about the *activating event*, he can actually change the emotional *consequences* (or how he feels).

Individuals need to ask themselves: When something negative happens, what do they *believe* about the event? When adversity strikes, do they tend to blame themselves or others? Do they see the cause of the problem as permanent or fleeting? Do they believe the cause will undermine everything in their life, or is it specific to this one adversity? The better they are at identifying and labeling their “*why*” beliefs, the easier it will be for them to change those beliefs when they interfere with their ability to respond to adversity (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

There are a number of questions for Boomers who have lost their jobs to ask themselves, including: What is the nature of their ticker-tape beliefs (*those thoughts that often fill their minds*)? Are they someone whose emotions cluster around a sense of loss? Or danger? Or feeling anxious about the future? Are they concerned that they many have, inadvertently, hurt someone? Or do they frequently compare themselves to others? Do they tend to blame themselves for their problems, even when it probably is not entirely their fault? The more they explore their *beliefs* about *activating events*, the more they will start to see their patterns. That awareness is where change begins. As they explore these questions, it is important to keep in mind that their habitual thoughts are the riverbed, their emotions the river (Fredrickson, 2009).

As individuals start to explore their own thought patterns, it is worth noting that “*why*” questions are not the right questions to ask when they are upset. “Why” questions can put an individual on the defensive; and back them into a corner where they are simply looking for reasons to support what they already believe. People who are “*why*” oriented and who focus on internal causes of problems are more likely to feel sadness and depression when things go wrong. Nothing erodes resilience more quickly than depression. Nothing. Ironically, “*why*” questions do not lead to discovery when individuals are upset. Instead, “*what*” questions can get them where they need to be. Individuals are better off asking themselves: “What is the worst thing about this situation for me? What does that mean?” The goal is to keep probing along those lines until there is an understanding. “What” questions can get people who are feeling overwhelmed to stop and reflect more; and take them to a deeper level, ultimately helping them understand what they really believe (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

One of the things for individuals exploring such questions to be aware of is their own confirmation bias. Whenever individuals believe something strongly, they are more likely to

notice and interpret evidence to support their beliefs. That makes it hard for them to change – because they are reducing the flexibility of their thinking. As a result, they get more attached and entrenched in their beliefs. Essentially, everyone has a certain pair of glasses they put on that provides their view of the world. By becoming more aware of how they think, their goal is to change their perceptions (adjust those glasses). As they do, it will change their behavior. Eventually, perhaps, they will not even need those glasses (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

In addition to becoming more aware of how individuals can change their *behavior* (and thoughts), and thereby change the *consequences* of certain *activating events*, they can enhance their emotional awareness, impulse control and empathy by becoming more aware of their own personal thinking traps. While virtually everyone has personally tripped over all eight of the thinking traps, most individuals tend to be vulnerable to two or three traps (Reivich & Shatté, 2002).

Among the most common thinking traps is *Jumping to Conclusions*. This involves someone being absolutely certain of his or her belief; despite little or no evidence to support their beliefs. Jumping to conclusions is an easy trap to fall into when one is in the midst of a crisis. It comes from wanting to act quickly. To avoid this trap, individuals need to slow down and ask themselves: What evidence am I basing my conclusion on? Am I certain, or am I guessing? For a Baby Boomer who may not have been offered a job after an interview, he or she might immediately think it was because of age; but then might consider that it could have been because of a certain skill that was emphasized in the interview, which he or she could go back to school and obtain.

Another common thinking trap is *Tunnel Vision*. This involves *only* paying attention to information that is consistent with their belief and ignoring anything that could disconfirm their

belief. The goal for someone who is prone to tunnel vision is to refocus on the big picture. To avoid this trap, it is important to be even-handed and ask oneself: Am I assessing the entire picture? What salient information might I have missed? How important is what I am seeing to the entire picture? For a Baby Boomer who is not receiving responses to job applications, he or she might consider: Am I thinking too narrowly about my potential and capabilities? Do I have other skills that I am not emphasizing enough?

Magnifying and minimizing involves remembering most of the events that occurred, but over-emphasizing some, and under-emphasizing others. Some people are prone to over-emphasize the positive, while others over-emphasize the negative. For Baby Boomers who tend to magnify the bad and minimize the good, they need to ask themselves: Were there any good things that happened during the job interview? Did I do anything well? For Boomers who tend to dismiss the negative, they need to ask themselves: Am I overlooking any problems in how I might have come off during the job interview? Was I listening closely enough? Projecting myself positively enough? Were there any negative elements that I am dismissing the importance of? Being open and fair and considering all aspects of the situation is particularly important when individuals are trying to determine next steps in the midst of an adverse situation.

Personalizing is the tendency to attribute *or blame* the cause of an event on oneself – on one's personal characteristic or actions. To avoid this trap, a Baby Boomer who tends to be too hard on him or herself needs to look outward, and ask themselves: How did others or circumstances contribute to what happened? How much of the situation is due to others and how much is due to me?

Externalizing is the opposite of personalizing – the propensity to automatically attribute the cause of an event to other people or circumstances. Individuals with this tendency need to

hold themselves accountable. To avoid this trap, a Baby Boomer with this tendency needs to start looking inward and ask themselves: How might I have contributed to what happened? How much of this problem is due to others, and how much is due to me? Did I dress appropriately for the interview? Listen well enough? Talk too much?

Overgeneralizing involves all or nothing thinking about oneself and others. When something negative happens, it is the tendency to think: I am *always* this; or someone else is *always* that. To avoid this thinking trap, Baby Boomers being interviewed for a job will need to look at the behavior of the interviewer rather than what they believe to be the interviewer's character, and ask themselves: What does impugning my (or someone else's) character get me? Instead, was there something specific that might explain why the interview did not go as well as they hoped? Rather than assuming that the interviewer is dismissive and hard-hearted of people in my age group, consider that perhaps the interviewer was just having a bad day.

Mind Reading involves believing an individual knows what those around him or her are thinking, and expecting them to know what everyone else is thinking. To avoid this trap, Baby Boomers with this tendency will need to speak up in an interview, expressing their thoughts, and ask themselves: What else could I say or ask to increase understanding? Am I making my beliefs, thoughts or feelings known directly and clearly? Am I conveying all of the pertinent information? Or am I expecting the interviewer to figure out or just know my needs and goals? Am I assuming the same of others?

And the eighth Thinking Trap is *Emotional Reasoning*, which involves drawing conclusions about what is going on based solely on one's emotional state. To avoid this, Baby Boomers who tend to be overly emotional and have lost their way will want to pull back and try to separate their feelings from the facts. Questions to ask themselves include: Are my feelings

accurately reflecting the facts of the situation? While there are certainly people who believe that older people are not technically adept enough to compete in today's marketplace, there are also others who appreciate the wisdom that comes from experience. Consider the questions that need to be explored dispassionately in order to know the facts? (Reivich & Shatté, 2003).

Through these cognitive therapeutic techniques – avoiding Thinking Traps and the ABC model – individuals can become more resilient by becoming more aware of, and adjusting, the way they are thinking, and, therefore, being. Again, the goal is to learn to change their perceptions; and thereby change their behavior.

Ironically, people are often more aware of their feelings than their thoughts. But by becoming more aware of their thought patterns, they can bring about real change – in how they are thinking *and* feeling.

Conversely, resilience is diminished when individuals commit themselves to actions based on false beliefs. It is important to remember that it is easy to fall into thinking traps most when individuals are dealing with a button-push adversity. That is why it is important for Baby Boomers when faced with stressors to listen closely to their beliefs, being aware of thinking traps to which they are particularly susceptible. This is where it is important for Baby Boomers who may be feeling lost to understand how their beliefs can lead to certain consequences. For instance, believing that he or she will never be able to compete in today's tech-savvy world will lead one to feel sad, despondent and hopeless. Whereas, believing that he or she has always enjoyed learning, so could go back to school and acquire some new skills while networking with new people will leave someone feeling hopeful about the future, believing that they can reinvent themselves.

Learning how long-held personal beliefs can lead to certain consequences can go a long way toward helping individuals understand how they can change certain patterns in their life – becoming more optimistic and resilient (Reivich & Shatté, 2002). Particularly when trying to reassemble the pieces after losing a job, fortifying one's optimism and resilience can go a long way toward building confidence, which is vital to being open and honest to oneself and others, and becoming open to new possibilities.

Identifying and Developing Your Strengths

In addition to building optimism and resilience, for Baby Boomers who are trying to find their potential after losing their jobs, one of the core tenets of positive psychology is to identifying and developing their strengths (Seligman & Csikszentmihalyi, 2000).

Just to clarify, our *strengths* are our naturally recurring patterns of thoughts, feelings and behavior; whereas our *knowledge* consists of facts and lessons learned; and *skills* are the steps of an activity (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). People succeed, on their own terms, when they are tapping into their strengths (Greenberg & Sweeney, 2006). Of course, everyone has different strengths. What is most important is to discover them for ourselves, then make them our focus. Our strengths represent our potential (Peterson & Seligman, 2004).

Interestingly, however, 87 percent of people agree that finding their weaknesses and fixing them is the best way to achieve outstanding performance. Even though our history is replete with political and business heroes (from George Washington to Warren Buffet) who succeeded by accentuating their strengths, ironically that message seems to run against the grain of our popular culture (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). Just consider: if a child comes home with a report card that has an A, a couple of B's and a C on it, what does his or her teachers and

parents focus on? Improving the C, of course (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001). The message is to fix your weaknesses, rather than enhance your strengths.

However, the personality traits of adults are consistent and stable. Personality tests confirm this. Much as we might like to believe that we continually change, if we take a personality test twice, separated by many years, the results of the two tests will be uncannily similar. Not 100 percent the same, but where a perfect correlation is 1.0, the results of personality tests taken years apart are in the 0.7 to 0.9 range (Buckingham, 2007). As Popeye the Sailor, one of the popular cartoon characters the Baby Boomers grew up with, told them time and time again: “I yam what I yam” (Sagendorf, 1979).

For Baby Boomers who have just lost their jobs and are unsure of themselves and where to turn, the message from positive psychology as well as the cartoons they grew up watching, is clear: Do not try to reinvent yourself into someone who you are not. Rather, become *more of yourself*.

But how can Boomers who are feeling lost get clear about who they are? Particularly when their world has just been turned upside down and they are not quite sure which end is up?

The challenge can be difficult. Having a perspective of one’s strengths that is real and objective can be illusive. Just by way of example, in a recent Gallup Poll, people were asked to rate their own leadership ability. More than 1,000 people were randomly surveyed, and 97 percent rated their ability to lead as being at or above average. Even leaders of organizations, according to Gallup, are blind to the obvious when it comes to assessing their own personality strengths and limitations (Rath & Conchie, 2008).

Ironically, in a recent study of 50 highly courageous people, it was found that people are often “blind” to a personal strength because they view it as “ordinary” rather than

“extraordinary.” This does not appear to be a matter of humility or socially desirable self-presentation but represents a true psychological blind spot (Biswas-Diener, Kashdan, & Minhas, 2011).

So, how can a Baby Boomer who has just lost his or her job take advantage of an in-depth personality assessment that will provide objective insights into the strengths they possess? And how can they get guidance on how to turn up the volume on their strengths, as they search for a new way to find their meaning and purpose?

There are three places to turn which, for free or the cost of a book, can confirm, clarify and provide an understanding of their strengths: the VIA Survey, Gallup and Caliper.

The VIA Survey, which Seligman and Peterson developed just shy of a decade ago, highlights an individual’s five signature strengths, including: creativity, integrity, social intelligence, leadership, prudence and hope. The VIA Survey, created under the direction of Seligman and Peterson, is a free self-assessment, which can be accessed by going to this website: www.viacharacter.org.

Gallup has an assessment, which explores an individual’s five most dominant StrengthsFinder Themes, including: achiever, connectedness, focus, harmony, maximize and self-assurance. The assessment can be taken, without a fee, after purchasing one of their books, including: *Strengths Based Leadership* (Rath & Conchie, 2008), *Now, Discover Your Strengths* (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001); and *Go Put Your Strengths to Work* (Buckingham, 2007).

In addition, Caliper has an assessment that can provide you with insights into your top three strengths, including: persuasiveness, empathy, resilience, assertiveness, urgency and abstract reasoning. This assessment can also be taken without a fee, after purchasing one of their

books, including: *Succeed on Your Own Terms* (Greenberg & Sweeney, 2006) and *How to Hire & Develop Your Next Top Performer* (Greenberg & Sweeney, 2013).

The ultimate goal of these assessments (Niemic, 2013) is to help individuals become more aware of their potential, and, particularly for Baby Boomers caught in one of the most difficult times they may have come across, to reflect on who they are at their best. These assessments can provide insights that could help individuals discover a new path that could add meaning and purpose to their lives.

Researchers confirm that when individuals focus on their strengths, on their true potential, fortifying their resilience through cognitive techniques, and enhancing their optimism, they can become more positive. And their positive thoughts can be self-fulfilling (Lyubomirsky, 2008). If, for instance, an individual sees a possible future for him or herself (say, as a teacher) and the possibility of realizing it, they will persist in the plan even when they hit inevitable obstacles (e. g., failing the math prerequisite or having to drop out for a time) or when progress is slow. Indeed, researchers have shown that optimists are more likely to persevere and to engage fully even in the face of difficulty (Segerstom, 2001).

Baby Boomers who are looking for a new direction have some clear choices about how they can see *and* change their world. It all starts by focusing on their strengths, recovering and learning from setbacks, and being realistically optimistic. This does not mean avoiding all the negative or unfavorable information. Nor does it mean trying to control situations that cannot be controlled. Research shows that optimists are more, not less, vigilant of risks and threats (Aspinwall & Brunhart, 1996). They do not have their blinders on. Rather, optimists are very much aware that positive outcomes are dependent on their efforts (they do not wait around for good things to happen).

It all boils down to each individual's attitude. The world can be a difficult, painful place, and at the same time it can be wonderful and abundant. These are both truths. There is not a halfway point: there is only choosing which truth an individual put in his or her personal foreground (Lyubomirsky, 2008).

Searching Deeply Inside

Positive emotions (feelings such as excitement, joy, interest contentment, pride and love) are expressions, which are felt deeply and shared freely (Lyubomirsky, 2007). As recently unemployed Baby Boomers start to glean a sense of direction and purpose, some important questions they need to ask themselves are: If they are starting to feel positive, are they able to feel and express their positivity? Can other people sense their positive feelings? Are those positive feelings coming through, loud and clear, or trickling, as if from a leaky faucet? Or are they keeping their emotions (positive, negative and in-between) bottled-up inside?

The central truth about positive emotions is that if they are expressed, they can open individuals up (Fredrickson, 2009). That opening, if taken full advantage of it, can have a significant influence on how an individual views, experiences and impacts the world.

Positive emotions serve as markers of how well individuals are flourishing (Fredrickson, 2001). But that is only part of the story. While positive emotions signal to the world how well an individual is doing (Kahneman, 1999), positive emotions also produce flourishing. The take-home message is that positive emotions are worth cultivating, not just as end states in themselves, but also as a means to achieving psychological growth and improved well-being over time (Fredrickson, 2001).

According to the broaden-and-build theory of positive emotions (Fredrickson, 1998), discrete positive emotions, although phenomenologically distinct, all share the ability to broaden people's momentary thought-action repertoires and build their enduring personal resources, ranging from physical and intellectual resources to social and psychological resources. By broadening a person's momentary thought-action repertoire, a positive emotion may loosen the hold that a lingering negative emotion has gained on that person's mind and body (Fredrickson, 2001). While a positive emotion may be fleeting, it can have more long-lasting positive consequences by enhancing the individual's personal growth and social connections.

This message has enormous implications for Baby Boomers who have just lost their jobs and are struggling to find their way. Positivity offers an appealing vision of the recovered self, allowing others to feel more comfortable discussing one's feelings and needs. Positive emotions can ease social barriers, particularly when discussing professional topics, which can often seem to lack compassion or sensitivity. In this way, tapping into and releasing the positive emotions that are already within an individual can hold promise of attaining new futures (Fineman, 2006).

It is important to emphasize that this is not, in any way, meant to suggest that it is beneficial to deny negative emotions, such as feelings of fear, anxiety, sadness and hate. As was noted earlier, it is important for a Baby Boomer who has lost his or her job to come to terms honestly with those adverse emotions. Once the dust has settled around those emotions, though, it is very much in the Boomer's interest to find opportunities to allow his or her positive emotions to enter, and shine through (Fineman, 2006).

Positive emotions, such as gratitude, interest and love, can reduce the focus on negative emotions and put people's minds at ease, particularly in a crisis. Positive emotions have also

been shown to build resilience, enabling people to cope and thrive more effectively despite adversity (Fredrickson, Tugade, Waugh, & Larkin, 2003).

All of this begs the question: How can one cultivate positive emotions in crisis? Finding positive meaning may be the most powerful leverage point for cultivating positive emotions during difficult times. Positive meaning can be found in daily life by reframing adverse events in a positive light, infusing ordinary events with positive value, and pursuing and attaining realistic goals (Folkman, 1997).

Positive emotions might also be cultivated through positive interventions, which are cognitive and behavioral strategies designed for individuals to increase their well-being. Essentially, positive interventions are ways to get us to a particular goal, such as clarity, harmony or peace of mind. Among the interventions are exercises focused on counting one's blessings, expressing gratitude, savoring, writing down three things that went well each day, and using one's strengths in a new way (Pawelski, n.d.).

These positive interventions can be categorized by time. Not necessarily the amount of time they take to complete, but whether the exercise itself focuses one's attention on the past, the present or the future (Schueller, 2009). Which intervention might be most helpful? There are times when individuals may gain more happiness by recalling the past; at other times they may benefit more by savoring the present; then there are times when they will thrive by envisioning a new future. This is why there is no single intervention that is ideal for everyone, in all situations, at all times. Depending upon what is going on in an individual's life, and as a result what he or she may need at that particular time, there may be different combinations of positive interventions that would be of the most benefit. The best results of any positive intervention are derived from a three-step process – first individuals need to define their desired goal; then they

have to select the method they feel will get them where they want to be; then they need to practice (Pawelski, n.d.).

At the end of the day, positive interventions are ways to get people from here to there – from where they are to where they want to be. They are simple, self-administered activities intended to help individuals experience more positive feelings, such as optimism, gratitude and hope (Layous & Lyubomirsky, 2012). These behavior strategies are designed to help individuals create the space needed to open themselves up to experiencing positive emotions – for themselves and others. Essentially, these interventions are designed to help people pause, reflect and appreciate aspects of their lives to which they are not paying enough attention. Such focused reflection can provide meaningful insights for Baby Boomers who are seeking to find a new path.

To provide a clearer sense of what these positive interventions entail, here are a few examples:

Three good things in life – Reflect at the end of each day, and write down three things that went well on that day and why they went well. Perhaps the Baby Boomer just had a day when there seemed to be no advances on the job search. Those are the days, in particular, when reminding oneself of three good things in life can help a Baby Boomer realize that they have much for which to be grateful. By consciously pausing and taking time to reflect on what is positive, individuals can remind themselves of who they are at their very best. By taking note of little acts of kindness or even just a flower along their path, they can open themselves up to see each day more positively. As a direct result, they can find themselves looking forward to each day's new harvest (Fredrickson, 2009). In addition to this daily exercise, they are also encouraged to periodically review what they have written, as a way of tapping themselves on the

shoulder and realizing how blessed they are, as well as some of the many ways they may have contributed to make this world just a little better (Emmons, 2008). By recasting aspects of their daily lives that before seemed hidden from view or altogether mundane, individuals can see their lives as veritable gifts to be cherished (Fredrickson, 2009). Reflecting on the good things in life can be extremely effective because this intervention can remind individuals of the little (or not-so-little) things that can make their lives more positive, engaging and meaningful. By realizing something they may not have been consciously aware of – how positive their lives are – they can help smooth the way toward understanding and appreciating their enormous potential.

Ultimately, this intervention can help individuals recognize that they are, in fact, much more fortunate than they may have realized before. Widening their eyes can make them feel much more alive because they will be strengthening their connections – to themselves and those with whom they are sharing (Fredrickson, 2009).

Gratitude visit – Individuals are encouraged to think about and write a letter of gratitude to a person who has been especially kind to them, and who they would like to thank. Ideally, the letter will contain, in a very open, honest, vulnerable and real way, how very important the recipient of this letter has been to the individual, and how he or she has helped in ways for which the person writing is eternally grateful. The next step is to visit the person, without letting him or her know why, and read what was written out loud. Then, allow the individual who is being thanked to reflect, respond and reminisce (Seligman, 2002). Gratitude visits take an enormous amount of reflection, planning and courage. But the rewards can be immense – for the individual writing the letter and for the person who is receiving this unexpected gift. Ultimately, this intervention helps people tap into a part of themselves that they would not realize otherwise; helping them connect with those who are most important to them. By writing, then saying out

loud how grateful an individual is to someone who has helped them on their journey, they are connecting with their deepest, most sincere intentions, providing an enormous gift to the individual they are thanking, as well as to themselves.

While a Baby Boomer who is searching for a new direction might feel that he or she does not have the time, energy, effort or focus to prepare for a gratitude visit, the benefits of connecting with someone who has been important to the displaced Boomer can be enormous. Reconnecting with someone who has been extremely important to the Baby Boomer and expressing admiration and appreciation can have measurable positive emotions for over a month (Seligman, 2011).

Your best possible self – Another positive intervention is for a Baby Boomer who is searching for a new direction to write a narrative description of their best possible future self. Basically, this is a mental exercise in which the individual visualizes the best possible future for him or herself. Researchers found that people who wrote about their visions for twenty minutes per day over several days were more likely to show immediate increases in positive moods, to be happier several weeks later, and even to report fewer physical ailments several months afterward (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Committing their best possible selves to writing enabled participants to recognize that it was in their power to transform themselves and to work toward valued goals, that their dreams today and tomorrow did not hinge on circumstances out of their control or some stroke of luck (Lyubomirsky, 2007). Another advantage of the *best possible self* exercise is the fact that it is conducted through writing (Pennebaker & Grabeal, 2001). Because writing is highly structured, it prompts an individual to organize, integrate and analyze his or her thoughts in a way that would be difficult, if not impossible, to do if they were just fantasizing. Writing about personal goals – such as how they will come across in a job interview, going back to

school, what the perfect job would look like, or how to reinvent themselves – can help displaced Baby Boomers put their thoughts together in a coherent manner, allowing them to find meaning and hope in their life experience (Singer, 2004).

Using your strengths in a new way – By way of just one more example of a positive intervention, this strengths exercise starts with an individual identifying his or her most prominent strengths. As was noted in the previous section, there are three places to turn which, for free or the cost of a book, can confirm, clarify and provide an understanding of an individual's inherent strengths: the VIA Survey, Gallup and Caliper. Once newly-unemployed Baby Boomers becomes aware of their key strengths, they are encouraged to consider and use one of their strengths in a new and different way every day for a week. Perhaps they are best at connecting with others, or researching new positions or dreaming of new possibilities. Whatever their unique strengths, they will want to find new ways to exercise them. By identifying and emphasizing their strengths, they will be saying out loud (or, at least, to themselves) who they are at their very best. This recognition, when it becomes their mantra, can confirm that which they may know about themselves on a cellular level; but, for whatever reason, may not have been able to recognize and articulate. By confirming who they are, at their best, Baby Boomers who are seeking a new direction will be laying the groundwork for who they wish to become (Seligman, 2002).

While these are just a few of the positive interventions that are known to be effective, it is important to emphasize that there is no single intervention that is perfect for all individuals, or for all situations (Lyubomirsky, 2007). To determine the best intervention, each individual has to decide what “best” means for them. Ultimately, the best results of any positive intervention can only be derived from a deep understanding of what the individual needs at any given time. There

are times when they may gain more happiness by being reminded of how fortunate they are. In other situations, savoring the moment will create the positive feelings they are seeking. At other times, they may benefit most from focusing on their key strengths.

To consider which positive intervention might be most appropriate for a Baby Boomer who has just lost his or her job, it may be helpful to consider these interventions in terms of time. First, there are those interventions that build on past experiences, magnifying a pleasurable moment or interpersonal interaction. Next, there are interventions that involve focusing on what is going on in the here and now, reminding an individual of his or her strengths. Finally, there are interventions that help envision a new future, creating new possibilities (Schueller, 2010).

What is most encouraging is that positive interventions have been found, through a meta-analysis, to ameliorate depressive symptoms, while also enhancing well-being (Sin & Lyubomirsky, 2009). These findings are particularly encouraging to Baby Boomers who are seeking ways to keep themselves positive and energized when the uncertainty about their future could easily weigh them down.

Allow me to leave you with one last positive intervention, which can be particularly helpful for individuals facing a tough time. Challenging situations, such as a job loss late in one's career, can be a breeding ground for negativity. And negativity can scream so much louder than positivity. It can pull someone on a downward spiral so fast that it diminishes both them and their future prospects (Fredrickson, 2009). To shield oneself at such times, creating a positivity portfolio can have an immediate and lasting impact. This positive portfolio becomes a physical collection, built as a testimony to the individual's positivity. It is recommended that the creation of this portfolio be savored for a full week. While this might seem frivolous, physically creating your own unique positivity portfolio can make an enormous difference. Reexamining its contents

can remind an individual of all that is good in his or her life, inspiring them to find their way back to an upward spiral of positivity (Fredrickson, 2009).

The idea of building such a positive portfolio came to Barbara Fredrickson (2009) from James Pawelski, Director of Education and Senior Scholar in the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania. Earlier in his career, when he was invited to interview for a job as an assistant professor at Vanderbilt University, he was both excited and nervous. To build his confidence for that interview, he created a positive portfolio of mementos, including an encouraging email message from Mike Csikszentmihalyi and a snapshot of himself with Marty Seligman. Once he had fully prepared for his interview, he spent the final thirty minutes revisiting his portfolio and connecting with it emotionally. It reminded him that, although young, he was respected and capable. He entered the interview feeling calm and confident, was offered the position he was seeking, and credits that half-hour of reflection as putting him in a frame of mind where he was prepared to be his best self (Fredrickson, 2009).

Finding Your Ideal Goal

Baby Boomers who are trying to find a new way for themselves can take a page from some innovative organizations who are planning for the future by discovering what is best about them, dreaming of what might be, designing how it can happen, then creating the destiny (Cooperrider, Whitney, & Stavros, 2008).

In many traditional organizations, when they want to explore goals for the coming year, they start with a classic SWOT analysis, which is a structured planning method used to evaluate strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats. This technique is credited to Albert Humphrey, who used data from Fortune 500 companies during the 1960s and 70s to analyze their internal

and external advantages and concerns (Humphrey, 2005). Positive psychology's answer to a SWOT analysis is an assessment known as SOAR, which is an acronym for strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009).

The difference between SWOTing and SOARing has to do with the questions that are asked; with the understanding that, ultimately, the questions we ask determine what will be found (Cooperrider & Goodwin, Draft).

To produce positive change in organizations, an approach known as Appreciative Inquiry has been developed which explores questions about strengths, opportunities, aspirations and results (Cooperrider et al., 2008). The Appreciative Inquiry process involves a *4-D Cycle* of *discovery, dream, design and destiny*. In the *discovery* phase individuals engage in dialogue to uncover what is best about the organization. In the next phase, *dreaming*, the best of "what is" leads to envisioning what might be. The future is then *designed* in such a way that the exceptional is poised to become everyday and normal. This *design* is more than a vision. It is a provocative and inspiring statement of intention that is grounded in the realities of what has worked in the past combined with what new ideas are envisioned for the future. Guided by this *design*, innovative ways are found to move closer to the *destiny* (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

Baby Boomers who are seeking to find themselves after losing their jobs can modify this process, which was used by Nelson Mandela when he became President to bring the disparate groups of South Africa together. The focus and scope of the inquiry needs to be modified, but the ultimate *destiny* can be just as transforming (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

The foundational questions of Appreciative Inquiry can be adapted for an individual seeking a new path. The first three questions are focused on continuity. As Jim Collins said,

“Change is good, but first know what you should never change” (May 25, 1995, p. 1) Questions for an individual to consider in the *dreaming* phase are:

- *What would you describe as a high-point experience for you? A time when you were most alive and engaged?*
- *Without being modest, what do you value most about yourself? Your work?*
- *What are the core factors that give life to you?*

The next step is for the individual to open him or herself to novelty, unexpected newness and new possibilities. The question for an individual to consider in this *dream* phase is:

- *Imagine you have awakened from a long, deep sleep. You get up to realize that everything is as you always dreamed it would be. Your ideal state has become the reality. What do you see? What is going on? How have things changed?*

Finally, there is the transition, the intentional change. This is where the individual wants to determine how to achieve the *dream* that was *discovered*. The question to consider now is:

- *What three wishes do you have for yourself?*

Through honestly and deeply exploring these questions in a way that emphasizes his or her strengths, a Baby Boomer can start to map a new direction. Ultimately, the answers to those questions can set the stage for a new future (Cooperrider et al., 2008).

Someone who took this Appreciative Inquiry approach to heart is Debra (who requested that her story be told anonymously). She had been promoted several times over the past decade, rising to the level of vice president of human resources for an international software development company (personal conversation, June 16, 2014). That was when a new chief financial officer came on board, and caught in a crossfire between politics and personalities, it did not take long for Debra to be offered a severance package – four months before she would qualify to receive a full pension. With the aid of a lawyer, she was awarded her full pension, and a severance

package that allows her enough time to determine her next move. But, now in her late 50s, she is not psychologically ready, nor financially prepared to retire. Several months after being let go, what still bothers her, she shared, was that her sense of control in the situation was “completely wiped away.” And because of the impersonal manner in which her dismissal was handled, after steadily progressing in the organization for nearly a decade, she felt that her dignity was impugned, and all of her accomplishments were for naught. As if confirming this, she said, “Throughout the past decade, as I was working, my phone and computer would be ringing and pinging from recruiter contacts. Today, it is silent. My calls now go unanswered.” To help her get through “the overwhelming sense of helplessness and hopelessness” she was feeling, the day after her dismissal was finalized, Debra created her own personal Appreciative Inquiry Summit. She spent the entire next day with two of her mentors, previous bosses with whom she had stayed in touch. They bolstered her confidence, providing insights and perspective into her strengths, previous accomplishments, and new possibilities. Together, they focused on her inherent strengths, encouraged her to explore her negative feelings, considered options for her best possible self, and dreamed. While she is still deciding on her next step, the possibility that came from this day of reflection that excites Debra most is to focus her leadership talents in the field of dance, where her first professional dreams began. She spent 15 years as a dancer, then nearly a decade as a teacher. Like a magnet, she feels herself being drawn to go back to her roots, to her original love – a world she left only because she thought she could not make a suitable living in it, and she felt it was lacking in leadership. Now, however, she sees new possibilities – combining what she has learned about leadership from the corporate world with her love of dance (personal conversation, June 16, 2014).

For Baby Boomers seeking to find a new job in their field or perhaps a new field all together, how can they make sure they are on the right track; and, if they join a new organization that they will not be jumping from the frying pan into the fire?

An important question for someone to ask him or herself is whether they see their work as a job, a career or a calling. Research shows that people can derive different kinds of meaning from most any job or occupation. For those who see their work as a job, what they do is simply a means to a financial end. For those who see their work as a career, the increased pay, prestige, and status that come with advancement become a dominant focus. For those who see their work as a calling, there is a feeling that what they are doing is making the world a better place (Wrzesniewski, 2003).

For those seeking jobs that cultivate meaningfulness, considering how they might craft an ideal job – in terms of their responsibilities, skills, relationships and perceptions – can go a long way toward understanding what they would like, and not like, in their next job (Berg, Dutton, & Wrzeniewski, n.d.).

For an individual thinking about a job that would ideally suit his or her values strengths and passions, a booklet to help walk through the steps of crafting an ideal job can be obtained at: [www. Jobcrafting.org](http://www.Jobcrafting.org). This approach, known as job crafting, would enable a Baby Boomer to look at an ideal job in a way that plays to his or her strengths, making the work more engaging and fulfilling. Questions to be considered include: which tasks are most engaging, ways to enhance relationships at work, and changing the way one thinks about the purpose of tasks, relationships, or the job as a whole (Wrzeniewski, Berg, & Dutton, 2010).

The goal is to approach these transitions with a spirit that is positive and transcendent – so that individuals can be opened up to brand new possibilities (Wrzesniewski, 2003). That

definition of a goal gives new meaning to where we are going. For Baby Boomers who have just lost their jobs and are afraid they may have lost their futures, the goal is less about finding a job and more about finding themselves.

Consider for a moment, if someone is climbing a mountain, what is the most important thing they need to get to the summit? Confidence? Teamwork? Cooperation? The right equipment? Training? The weather to be in their favor? All those things are required. But what is most important is the mountain itself. What is most needed is the goal (Stephens, 1994).

As Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs and are, understandably, concerned that they need to find immediate shelter, Conroy and O'Leary-Kelly (2014) contend that the most significant losses present the greatest opportunities for disruption while simultaneously presenting the greatest opportunities for growth. The outcome, ultimately, depends on how effectively emotions are processed. Catalyzing events can prompt individuals to become more authentic (Roberts, Hewlin, & Settles, 2009).

Becoming more authentic is the goal that positive psychology promises (Seligman, 2011). As Boomers who are looking to reinvent themselves start to set goals, it is worth keeping in mind the words of William James (1911/1924), "Compared to what we ought to be, we are only half awake" (p. 237). Before setting a goal that in any way compromises what they truly wish and are capable of, Baby Boomers seeking a new direction may also want to heed James's observation (1911/1924): "My experience is what I agree to attend to" (p. 402). This is a revolutionary thought. What individuals notice and what they pay attention to *is* their experience; it *is* their life (Lyubomirsky, 2007). There is only so much attention that any Baby Boomer seeking to find a new direction has to go around, so how and where they choose to "attend" can make all the difference in the world.

With that caveat, as Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs seek to find a new way, it is important to keep in mind that one of the most promising ways that has been discovered to engage an individual's motivation is by setting goals that are specific and stretch his or her abilities (Locke, 1996).

From William James, the “father” of psychology, to the present, the message is consistent: before consciously deciding to set a goal, an individual needs to be clear about what he or she really wants – not what others want for them, or what they believe is expected of them (Locke, 1996).

Once a specific goal is set and focused upon, hope can then become the primary source of sparking, igniting and fueling an individual's motivation (Lopez, Snyder, Maygar-Moe, Edwards, Pedrotti, Janowski, Turner, and Pressgrove, 2004). Although most positivity arises when individuals feel safe and secure, hope is an exception. Hope comes into play when circumstances are dire, or there is considerable uncertainty about how things will turn out. Deep within the core of hope is the belief that things can change (Fredrickson, 2009).

So, with hope at their back, for each Baby Boomer who has lost their job and is seeking to find a new direction, the question about setting a goal is as individual as their DNA.

This leaves each individual who is seeking a new direction with one final question: Once they have selected their personal goal, tapped into the strengths and motivation, and fueled where they want to go with hope, optimism and resilience – what is the best way to reach their destination?

Do you mean the shortest way? The most scenic route? The one with fewer tolls? Those are the questions your Global Positioning System would ask before providing you with an

answer. To get to the goal, each individual has to decide what “best” means – for him or herself. Then select the route, make sure they have enough gas, and drive.

Robert Stabinsky found that his goals, and just about everything else, shifted out from under him when the economy hit the fan in the autumn of 2008 (personal conversation, June 24, 2014). For 17 years, he had been at the helm of Innovative Systems Engineering, Inc., a firm that created prototypes for vacuum deposition equipment. That is a short, technical way of saying that his firm was contracted to create cutting edge engineering processes that could be put into production. The bet was that if they succeeded, the company that contracted with his firm would be technically ahead of their competition by a generation.

While his company had enough contracts to get through the economic downturn that knocked this country for a loop, the cash stopped flowing. As his client’s payments came to a grinding halt, everything trickled back to him. He could not pay his employees, his suppliers or the rent. The bank started to grumble, and rumors rumbled, as his prospects started asking if he and his firm were going to be around much longer. It became clear that the clock was ticking. Stabinsky told his 17 employees that they were up against a wall. Each of them said they would stay on without pay, which they did for several weeks, hoping he could turn the situation around. They had all been in it and through much together. And they believed in him, like they knew he believed in them. But this time, belief alone would not get them through. Shortly thereafter, his company’s contracts and technology was acquired. But Stabinsky and his employees were not part of the package.

He had to determine his next step. Quickly. For quite some time, he had not taken a salary, hoping to get his company through the turmoil. Now he had to find a new way. Like many entrepreneurs, earlier in his career, he and each and every one of his previous employers

had confirmed that working for someone else was not his strong suit. Taking direction on a daily basis from someone else was not something he wanted to consider again at this stage in his career. He needed to be on his own. But he was not sure where to turn. Anxiety attacks kept him up through most nights. Where could he turn? He did not have the resources to start another company or the stomach to work full-time for someone else.

As he tried to help his employees find new places to land, he heard an echo from them over and over again. While they received offers, they were not about to go to work for less money than they had been making. They were worth more than that, they fervently believed. Now, several years later, most of them, Stabinsky said, are still unemployed, because they were not flexible enough to see the writing on the wall – to recognize that the times have changed. He sighed, then said, “It’s like they are thinking linearly, while everything is going counterclockwise.”

As for himself, he has become a consultant, advising clients on long-term contracts. Consulting, he quickly found out, is completely different from running his own firm. Now the clients call the shots. They look to him for his expertise and advice, sometimes going along with his recommendations, and sometimes going against them. “It is a matter of giving up control,” he said, recognizing the difference between running his own ship and advising others on the best course to take. Being a consultant, he said, can be engaging and challenging, depending upon the client. “About two-thirds of them,” he said, “are looking for me to confirm their beliefs; and about a third of them are looking for me to bring a challenging, objective opinion. That one-third is where I thrive.” The upside for him is that he is still recognized for his expertise and called upon by people in his industry who are seeking his advice or his stamp of approval. Either way,

he is still in the game, on his own terms, even though those terms have changed in ways he never expected (personal conversation, June 24, 2014).

For Baby Boomers who are seeking to discover where their next turn will take them, being clear about their goals is the only way to reach their destination. As with most aspects of positive psychology, there is no one right answer for everyone (Seligman, 2011). But the question needs to be explored, openly and honestly. And the goal determined for each individual. Otherwise, they will each be like archers, shooting arrows at moving targets, or just at thin air.

Searching Broadly Outside

In addition to looking within, Baby Boomers who are looking to write their own next chapter will want to look outside. Research clearly demonstrates that – in addition to motivation, ability and opportunity - success depends heavily on how individuals approach their relationships with others (Grant, 2013).

Flourishing is not a solo activity. It is scientifically accurate to say that nobody reaches his or her full potential in isolation (Seligman, 2011). Every person who flourishes has warm and trusting relationships with other people, whether it is with a spouse, a romantic partner, close friends, family or all of the above (Fredrickson, 2009). The tie between well-being and connecting with others is so reliable that researchers have called it a necessary condition for flourishing (Diener & Seligman, 2002).

In addition, research suggests that individuals do not have to be outgoing to connect in meaningful ways with others. Cultivating concern and compassion for others is all that is needed to create a meaningful connection (Fredrickson, 2009).

Several individuals who have been interviewed for this Capstone have even gone so far as to develop their own informal Board of Directors, which comprises a few friends and colleagues who are viewed as trusted advisors, people to whom the recently unemployed Baby Boomers can turn for professional advice as well as personal solace (personal conversations, June 16 & June 24, 2014).

Research has also pointed to four ways to build high-quality connections (Dutton, 2003). The first is respectful engagement, which includes being present, attentive and affirming. The second is to be there for the other person, to help him or her succeed. The third is sharing trust, believing you can depend on the person, and they can depend on you. The fourth is play, to have fun with each other, being involved in an activity you both enjoy. Engaging with others in one or more of these ways can transform relationships from ordinary into high-quality (Dutton, 2003).

It is important to note that high-quality connections do not necessarily require a deep personal knowledge of the other person or an extensive interaction. Any point of contact with someone else holds the potential of being a high-quality connection. It might be just one conversation or an email exchange that can infuse both participants with a greater sense of vitality (Dutton, 2003). Where positive energy is activated through a high-quality connection, it can lead to “positive spirals” providing each individual with more energy and positive emotions (Fredrickson, 2009).

Research has found, however, that when it comes to reinventing oneself, closest relationships can often hinder, as much as they help. While they may wish to be supportive, they can tend to reinforce the old identity someone is seeking to shed. What is also needed for someone seeking a new path is to shift connections. This practice refers to finding people who

can help someone see and grow into their new self, people who are admired and with whom the individual wants to spend time (Ibarra, 2003).

Confirming this, a study surprisingly uncovered that, while most people find their jobs through personal connections, those connections were neither friends, family, nor close work associates. Instead, they were distant acquaintances. Among those who got jobs through personal contacts, the great majority had interacted with that contact only occasionally or rarely; and many of those “weak ties” were connections developed earlier in the individual’s career that had been dormant (Granovetter, 1973).

In addition to long-standing and new connections, the world of social networking offers, with ease that was previously unimaginable, enormous possibilities for Baby Boomers to *reconnect* with people with whom they have lost touch (Levin, Walter, & Murnighan, 2011). Facebook, LinkedIn, Google and other Internet sites have made building a strong, wide personal network as easy as a few keystrokes. Getting information and keeping connected with long-lost friends, colleagues and acquaintances can broaden possibilities for a Baby Boomer who is seeking to reinvent him or herself (Levin et al., 2011).

Not too long ago, researchers assumed that neglected relationships would lose their value. However, recent research shows that reconnecting dormant relationships is more than just fun – it can be extremely helpful. In one study, hundreds of individuals encouraged to consult people whom they had not been in contact with for three years or more; and ask for advice. The advice they received was as useful, and often even more useful, than the advice they received from their current relationships (Levin et al., 2011).

Most significantly, virtually all of the participants in the study were reluctant to contact someone that they had fallen out of touch with. Some admitted to simple inertia, others reported

embarrassment about not staying in contact, some voiced their fear of coming across as being opportunistic, while others just did not want to impose personally on other people. So they were actually expecting the opposite of the very helpful results they received (Levin et al., 2011).

The researchers concluded that reconnecting a dormant relationship is not like starting a relationship from scratch. When people reconnect, they still have *feelings of trust and a shared perspective* – which are critical for receiving valuable knowledge from someone. The research showed that these feelings do not fade much, if at all; rather the old feelings and sense of connection typically come rushing back quickly (Levin et al., 2011).

For Baby Boomers wishing to connect or reconnect with others, at a time when they may also be feeling a strong pull to withdraw, it is worth noting that trust is conveyed most clearly when people are open, showing their vulnerability in ways that are clearly visible (Zand, 1997). For those feeling a sense of loss, and not wanting to burden someone else with their troubles, it may be helpful to realize that by being vulnerable they can actually strengthen their connection with others (Grant, 2013). While many people may have a natural tendency *not* to ask for help, it is worth noting that if they do not ask, they are actually depriving people in their lives from giving to them. Their family and friends may want to help, but feel awkward about asking. Equally important, if someone in need does ask for help, he or she will be learning, when the time is right, to become a better, more empathic giver (Grant, 2014). For a Boomer who has lost his or her job and may feel awkward about asking for help, this message is important to hear.

In addition, while Boomers at such a difficult juncture in their life may feel they have nothing left to give, it may actually be the perfect time to find a way to give back. Researchers have demonstrated that giving to others can have an energizing effect when it is done in a way that is enjoyable and meaningful, rather than out of a sense of duty or obligation (Weinstein &

Ryan, 2010). In addition, studies show that giving adds meaning to our lives, distracts us from our own problems and helps us feel valued by others (Baumeister, Vohs, Aaker, & Garbinsky, 2013). By volunteering time to a cause that is particularly important to him or her, Seligman notes, a job-seeking Baby Boomer can find the inner strength and warmth that comes from connecting with others in an activity that is meaningful (i.e.: bigger than themselves). Those connections, then, may also lead to places yet unknown (personal conversation, June 4, 2014).

Finding Your Center

So, for Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs and feel they are not quite who they were before, the question looms: who are they going to be? A variation on a theme? Someone else? What have they found that motivates them, connects with their inherent strengths, and can create new possibilities for themselves? (Ibarra, 2003).

According to the National Council on Aging, Baby Boomers who have landed on their feet after losing their jobs describe what they went through as *redefining* themselves (Reill & Schwartz, 2011). Technically, *redefine* means to define again or differently – to give a new meaning (Merriam-Webster.com). Redefining oneself, though, is not a straightforward process of trading in an old, worn-out model for a new and improved one; nor is progress always made along a straight and linear path (Ibarra, 2003).

While feeling as if they are in between identities, Boomers who are searching for a new path may also find themselves shifting between their inner search and the outer possibilities. It can be daunting and confusing, feeling betwixt and between, as they alternately explore their desires and potential, while testing the realities and vagaries of the job market. To get from the “in between” to a “new beginning,” individuals have to create new possibilities that might

replace what has been lost, while finding ways to evaluate those alternatives against the needs of the marketplace (Ibarra, 2003).

For newly-unemployed Baby Boomers, it is often a time of oscillating between introspection and testing reality. Adult development is a process of continual searching that requires both questioning and commitment (Erikson, 1959/1980). Optimists facing adversity cope by alternating between *reappraisal* (doing work within – finding realistic optimism) and *active coping* (taking direct action to fix a problem) (Haidt, 2006).

The reinvention considered here is a process and practice that allows individuals to get back in touch with forgotten selves, to reorder priorities and to explore long-standing or newfound interests. Boomers in transition will not find themselves in a blinding flash of insight, nor will they change overnight. They will learn by reflecting, doing, reflecting again, and then trying once more. And each new experience becomes part answer and part question (Ibarra, 2003).

Going through such redefining life changes requires a time of uncertainty and doubt. Still, for those with a positive attitude, there can be several benefits derived from such turmoil. The first benefit is that rising to a challenge reveals one's hidden abilities, and seeing those abilities can change one's self-concept. The second benefit is that adversity is a filter through which individuals can come to recognize the benefits of relationships that they may have otherwise taken for granted. The third benefit of such challenging times is that one's focus on the present can become much more attentive. As a result of these benefits, in the wake of adversity, people who are optimistic often find it easier to change their goals, their priorities and their focus (Haidt, 2006).

As Baby Boomers navigate this “journey through the wilderness which no one else can make for (them), and which no one can spare (them)” (Proust, 1922), to “receive” the wisdom they are seeking, they will want to take care of themselves – their body and their mind, exercising both, while recognizing the connection.

Taking care of oneself during stressful times is a major concern, as each of the individual’s interviewed in this Capstone spoke of having mental and physical distresses– from anxiety to depression to consuming more alcohol to gaining more weight (personal conversations, May 29, June 16, June 24, & June 25, 2014).

To counter these adverse affects of losing one’s job, Baby Boomers in transition may gain benefits by practicing mindfulness, a scientifically tested way to curb negativity’s momentum (Fredrickson, 2009). Jon Kabat-Zinn was the first Western scientist, in the early 1980s, to cull the psychology of mindfulness from age-old Buddhist practices and teach them to his Boston area medical patients. He called the work Mindfulness-Based Stress Reduction, explaining that “Mindfulness means paying attention in a particular way: on purpose in the present moment, and nonjudgmentally” (Kabat-Zinn, 1994). Through meditation practices, one is able to take a step back from the stream of thoughts and sensations, to gain a wider perspective on his or her thinking. In a state of mindfulness, it becomes possible to accept negative thoughts without reacting to them emotionally (Fredrickson, 2009). Researchers have demonstrated that individuals who regularly practice meditation enhance their happiness by realizing a state of awareness *and* detachment (Lyubomirsky, 2007). One study showed that a six-week meditation workshop made adults happier by augmenting their daily positive emotions, producing, in turn, such benefits as more savoring of the present moment, enhanced quality of their relationships, more social support, and a reduction in their illness symptoms (Fredrickson, Cohn, Coffey, Pek,

& Finkel, 2007). A mindful state also fosters openness to new information, as well as different points of view (Langer, 1989).

Interestingly, Eastern and Western views of mindfulness have similarities and differences; though they can both be beneficial to opening and calming one's mind. In the West, mindfulness is considered *consciously* opening oneself up to ways in which one's beliefs or perspective can be self-limiting. In recognizing that there are multiple ways to view any situation, being mindful in this context means not mindlessly just assuming that the way the individual sees a situation is the only – or the best – way (Langer, 1989). In the East, a mindful state is sought in which the mind becomes quieter and active thought is discouraged. In some forms of meditation, thoughts and images that come to mind are considered to be unimportant, and relinquished as soon as one discerns their presence (Langer, 1989). The goal of both forms of mindfulness is for the mind to either consciously or subconsciously break down former ways of thinking, so that old categories dissolve and the individual is no longer trapped by stereotypes (Langer, 1989).

In addition to calming the mind, accelerating physical activity can also enhance the psychological well-being of a Baby Boomer who is encountering daunting challenges (Mutri & Faulkner, 2004). Physical exercise provides several benefits, not the least of which is that as one's stamina and muscle tone improves through daily exercise, one's self-perception is also promoted. As individuals feel better about themselves physically, they will, in kind, feel better about themselves psychologically. The physical and psychological aspects of an individual are mirrored, inexorably connected (Shusterman, 2006). Beyond this, it has been demonstrated that physical activity can contribute to learned optimism (Seligman, 2002).

In this way, meditating and physical exercise can calm the mind and strengthen the body of a Baby Boomer who is, understandably, under much stress, while also connecting them more fervently to their inherent strengths and personal goals (Shusterman, 2006). Physical exercise and meditating need to be seen as not just breaks from the individual's focus on finding a new path; but as enhancements to the search. As commitment, hope and belief in taking care of one's physical and emotional self improves, it can have a multiplying effect, fueling motivation and drive in other areas of one's life (Shusterman, 2006).

Keeping one's mind and body strong is integral to helping an unemployed Baby Boomer stay positive as he or she searches – inward and outward – for the next phase of their life. As William James (1967) noted, “The body is a storm-center, with everything circling around it and felt from its point of view” (p. 284). Taking care of oneself is one of the surest, most positive ways to get through any storm.

Staying Positive

For Baby Boomers who may be feeling rejected by their past and uncertain of their future, the best place to be is in the present (Lyubomirsky, 2009). But how can someone in the midst of turmoil go from being “half-awake,” as William James (1924) calls it, to being in the present moment?

It all starts with finding positive meaning (Fredrickson, 2009). Does the local forecast predict that tomorrow will be partly cloudy or partly sunny? Judgments about the past and expectations about the future can cloud one's ability to be open to the present.

It is worth noting that although most positive emotions arise when one feels safe and gratified, hope is an exception. Hope reaches in and out when circumstances are dire – when

things are not going well for an individual or there is considerable uncertainty about how things may turn out (Fredrickson, 2009). Hope, in desperate situations, is “fearing the worst but yearning for better” (Lazarus, 1991). Deep within the core of hope is the belief that things can change. Hope is the message that possibilities exist; and that message can be all that is needed to sustain someone through a difficult stage in their journey. Hope motivates individuals to tap into their capabilities to turn things around – allowing them to see that partly cloudy and partly sunny are, in fact, the same thing – providing ample reason to plan for a better future (Snyder, 2002).

For a Baby Boomer who has lost his or her job, hope can be found by giving oneself permission and time to experience the richness of the present moment (Fredrickson, 2009). Hope can arise from as simple an activity as going for a morning walk. But, as with so many things in life, what is important here is not the “what” but the “how.” While on a walk, rather than being lost in one’s ever-expanding mental to-do list, hope can be found by simply being open to the colors of the leaves, the call of the birds, and the smell of the wet grass (Fredrickson, 2009). Walking in another direction, hope can be found in a baby’s smile or the story of a friend’s good fortune. By being open, hope can be found all around. It is inspiring and inspires, breathing life into new possibilities (Lyubomirsky, 2009). With that opening, a Baby Boomer seeking a new direction may start to hear a beating sound – at first distant and quiet, then more pronounced and familiar – which he or she will come to recognize as his or her own heart. Within that sound, they may find the opening they were seeking. For hope resides in one’s heart. To find hope, a Baby Boomer who is feeling lost needs to “un-numb” his or her heart (Fredrickson, 2009). This is necessary because positivity that is *not* felt – that does not register with the heart – does not provide any benefits. Positive emotions need to be heartfelt. The promise for Boomers who are trying to emerge from their own inner turmoil is that as their hearts and minds slowly start to

open, positive emotions will begin to flow – at first in a trickle, ultimately allowing them to discover and build new skills, new connections, new knowledge and new ways of being (Fredrickson, 2009).

As recently unemployed Boomers open their hearts, they may get back in touch with their younger selves – that part of them that thrived when they first heard the message that *you can learn to be you in time* (Lennon & McCartney, 1967), as well as to stay *Forever Young* (Dylan, 1974). Their younger selves may remind them that staying young means constantly questioning and experimenting. It means having renewed vigor and energy for the ongoing challenges and adventures of life. Staying young means pursuing your passions and being open to new possibilities (Smith & Clurman, 2007).

While their jobs have long been a central part of the psyche of Baby Boomers, meaningful work has been particularly important (Smith & Clurman, 2007). As their future unfolds, that meaning will take on increased significance (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008).

Depending upon their needs, some recently-unemployed Baby Boomers will have to be employed full-time, very quickly; others will be seeking “bridge jobs” to carry them from their primary careers to their retirement; others will be looking for “phased retirement,” a transitional approach in which older workers gradually reduce the number of hours worked in stages until they retire. In each of those cases, as they seek new opportunities, the desire to make an impact that rewards them with a sense of meaning and fulfillment will be at least as important as the money they earn (Smith & Clurman, 2007).

For Boomers whose lives have been temporarily turned upside down, when they are back on their feet, what will be clear is that they require a solid sense of meaning to thrive. Their work

will need to reflect values that they care about, with outcomes that they consider to be important (Diener & Biswas-Diener, 2008).

Then, with goals that spring from their values, they will be poised to find work that brings genuine meaning to their lives. As they tap into their strengths, enhance their optimism and resilience, rediscover their identities, connect with their hearts, craft what they are doing to reflect who they are, trust themselves and others, ask powerful questions, and take care of their hearts and minds, they will have aligned who they are with where they want to be.

By being open, self-reflective, and engaged in improving, Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs will be able to find resources within themselves that they were previously not aware of; and, in the fullness of that experience, they will be able to become “full expressions” of themselves (de Botton & Armstrong, 2013).

The end of all that exploring, as T. S. Eliot (1934) reminds us, will be for them to have arrived where they started “and know the place for the first time” (p. 59). It will be as if they have had sunglasses on for a very long time, and, having finally taken them off, they will marvel at the colors of the sky.

From the time they were children, the palette of most Baby Boomers was filled with openness, freedom, and a belief that the future was boundless. Half a century later, as many of those Boomers are losing their jobs through no fault of their own, positive psychology has arrived on the scene with ways to find hope, meaning and fulfillment (Seligman, 2011). As a result of this natural synergy, I believe, through the lens, questions, and interventions of positive psychology, Baby Boomers who have lost their jobs will be able to find their own compass, pointing in a new, more positive direction.

My hope is that the information gathered for this capstone will allow me to develop a website, articles, a book, a keynote presentation and seminars to help displaced Baby Boomers reach deep inside of themselves, so they can push off the bottom, finding resources within themselves, and with their connections, to help discover new directions and possibilities.

Acknowledgements

From the bottom of my heart, I thank Marty Seligman for creating this Master's Program, which, for me, has been a truly transformative experience. Among the many illuminating ideas Marty shared that I carry with me is: "I used to believe that optimism was about the way you thought about things in the past. What I know now is that optimists are people who think more good things will happen in the future."

My heartfelt thanks also goes to James Pawelski, the philosophical orchestra conductor, who magically pulls together the emerging voices of positive psychology into a continually inspiring performance piece. "Positive psychology is a light illuminating that which is inside all of us," he said. A light shinning. Brilliant. He also reminded us, "We could be writing our own stories."

I am also eternally grateful to Dan Tomasulo, who was my advisor for this capstone. His insights, enthusiasm, warmth, wit, suggestions and encouragement all came at just the right time, in just the right doses – helping me feel simultaneously challenged and inspired. His perceptions about identity, meaning, accomplishment, emotions, engagement, relationships, story telling and even his suggestions for the title, deepened my thoughts and feelings about what was possible.

And most significantly, I thank my wife Donna, who enthusiastically encouraged me to apply to this program, and to give it my all. Thank you for touching my heart, for believing in what can be, for your uncanny way of listening so clearly, for your deeply inspired messages, for your warm smile, for the light in your eyes, for the sound of your laughter, and for opening new possibilities. Thank you, Donna, for being you.

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