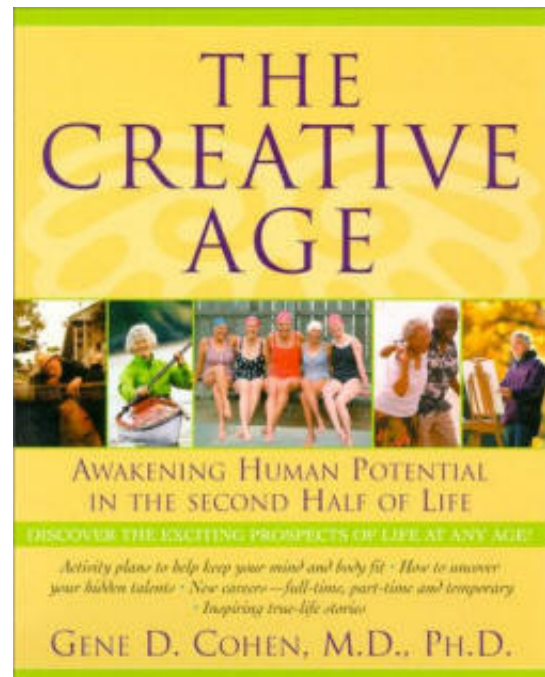

Follow your muse to better health and well-being: It's Never Too Late: Creativity in Later Life

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There IS a fountain of youth: it is your mind, your talents, the creativity you bring to your life and the lives of the people you love. When you learn to tap this source, you will truly have defeated age.
— Sophia Loren

The pursuit of one's dreams, the desire for artistic expression, and the pinnacle of creativity are concepts most people associate with youth. A growing body of research, however, shows that creative potential is not the unique domain of the young or middle-aged. In fact, the third age (65 years and older) offers many people their greatest opportunity to excel.



In *The Creative Age*, researcher Gene Cohen debunks harmful myths about aging

and illuminates the biological and emotional foundations of creativity. He shows how the unique combination of age, experience, and creativity can produce exciting inner growth and infinite potential for everyone. Dr. Cohen's current findings will be published in his forthcoming book, *The Mature Mind: The Positive Power of the Aging Brain*, due to be released in December.

Simply defined, creativity is bringing something new into existence — be it a product, process, new idea, or new way of looking at the world. That creativity exists at all in later life challenges popular thought; that it can thrive in the golden years is revolutionary thinking. Negative associations between aging and creativity are widespread and ingrained in our society in beliefs — “you can’t teach an old dog new tricks.”

According to Gene Cohen, author of *The Creative Age: Awakening Human Potential in the Second Half of Life*, creativity plays an important role in healthy aging. Preliminary findings in Cohen’s new national study demonstrate that seniors actively engaged in creative activities have significantly better overall mental and physical health, including fewer falls and doctor’s visits; less use of medications; fewer vision problems; less loneliness and depression; and an increased level of involvement in other activities.

Imagination is more important than knowledge.
— Albert Einstein

Creativity in Later Life

Most people think of creativity in the artistic sense — painting, music, dance, and so on. But creativity is also an element essential to most other fields, for example, biology, chemistry, and mathematics. Moreover, creative thinking is a necessary part of everyday life: it enhances our life enjoyment and provides the inspiration to problem-solve. Cohen believes that the ability to create is one of the key elements of our humanity; it exists in everyone, at every age, regardless of how much or little it is used or recognized.

He distinguishes three different ways and times in which aging and creativity intersect to provide new opportunities for personal growth and creative expression:

- 1) Creativity that begins and blossoms in later life
- 2) Creativity that continues as a lifelong pursuit, whether as a continuation in a particularly field, or that changes and takes a new form of expression
- 3) Creativity that develops as a response to adversity and loss.

It's never too late to be what you might have been.
— George Eliot

Late Bloomers

We call the flowering plants that reach their peak only late in the growing season *late bloomers*. Often these plants do not receive quite enough sun or nourishment. Then one day in late summer, they begin to blossom, one beautiful flower after another, often continuing well into autumn.

Among people, late bloomers are those individuals who (re)discover their creative spirits late in life — often in the face of adversity — and flourish as a result. As a society, we are fascinated and charmed by late-life bloomers.

Anna Mary “Grandma” Moses (1860-1961) had an interest in art when she was young, but her mother encouraged more practical activities. At age 27, she married a farmer, settled down on a farm, and birthed 10 children (5 died in infancy), which she went on to raise. She only returned to art in her late 70’s. A few years later, her paintings — depicting idealized rural life — and her modest, down-to-earth personality captivated the American public. When Grandma Moses died at the age of 101, she had completed more than 1600 paintings and earned an international reputation for her work.

My breakthrough came very late in life, really only starting when I was fifty years old. But at that time I felt as though I had the strength for new deeds and ideas.
— Hans Hofmann

Masters and Lifetime Achievers

Some people discover their talents early in life and remain creatively productive all their lives, albeit not always in the same style or even the same field. A surprising number live well into old age, many creating some of their best and most distinctive works in their elder years.

Adversity has the effect of eliciting talents that would otherwise have lain dormant.
— Horace

Out of Adversity Comes Creativity

If necessity is the mother of invention then one could say that adversity is the mother of creativity. Adversity is often the unexpected visitor. Unforeseen accidents, illness, death, or other significant losses can push us to our limits of endurance. Yet even out of the most bitter and terrible times, we can overcome hardship and despair by creative engagement.

You see things: and say “Why?” But I dream things that never were: and say “why not?”
— George Bernard Shaw

A Time to Flourish

Creativity is a lifelong gift — it is never too early or too late to tap into this renewable resource that

resides within each of us, whether to enhance our selves or our businesses. Age often brings with it more free time to create; fewer familial and social obligations; a lessening of inhibitions and fears; and heightens a sense of urgency: if not *now*, *when*?

The benefits of creativity in later life are numerous (Cohen, 2000). First, it improves mental and emotional health — creativity produces a fresh perspective, strengthens our morale, improves our sense of well-being, and makes us more emotionally resilient to life's adversities and losses. Second, creativity enhances our physical health. Creative expression makes us feel better and improves our outlook, which in turn provides a beneficial effect to our immune systems and general physical health. Third, creativity enriches relationships with family and friends. Finally, creativity provides a legacy. The example you set to stay intellectually active, socially involved and creatively engaged will have a positive affect on the younger people around you.

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