

“In this book, Arthur C. Brooks helps people find greater happiness as they age and change.” —The Dalai Lama

Arthur C. Brooks

NEW YORK TIMES Bestselling Author

From Strength to Strength

FINDING SUCCESS, HAPPINESS,
AND DEEP PURPOSE IN
THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

From
Strength
to
Strength



FINDING SUCCESS, HAPPINESS, AND
DEEP PURPOSE IN THE SECOND HALF OF LIFE

Arthur C. Brooks

PORTFOLIO / PENGUIN



Portfolio / Penguin
An imprint of Penguin Random House LLC
penguinrandomhouse.com



Copyright © 2022 by Arthur Brooks

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

Grateful acknowledgment is made for permission to reprint “I’m Nobody! Who are you?” excerpted from *The Poems of Emily Dickinson: Variorum Edition*, edited by Ralph W. Franklin, Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, Copyright © 1998 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1951, 1955 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © renewed 1979, 1983 by the President and Fellows of Harvard College. Copyright © 1914, 1918, 1919, 1924, 1929, 1930, 1932, 1935, 1937, 1942 by Martha Dickinson Bianchi. Copyright © 1952, 1957, 1958, 1963, 1965 by Mary L. Hampson. Used by permission. All rights reserved.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Brooks, Arthur C., 1964– author.

Title: From strength to strength: finding success, happiness, and deep purpose in the second half of life / Arthur C. Brooks.

Description: First Edition. | New York: Portfolio/Penguin, 2022. | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2021040786 (print) | LCCN 2021040787 (ebook) | ISBN 9780593191484 (hardcover) | ISBN 9780593191491 (ebook)

Subjects: LCSH: Older people—Psychology. | Aging—Psychological aspects. | Spirituality. | Happiness.

Classification: LCC BF724.8 .B76 2022 (print) | LCC BF724.8 (ebook) | DDC 155.67—dc23/eng/20211015

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021040786>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2021040787>

Cover design: Jennifer Heuer

Cover image: Christiaan Hart / Alamy Stock Photo

Book design by Jennifer Daddio / Bookmark Design & Media / adapted for ebook by Estelle Malmed

Some names and identifying characteristics have been changed to protect the privacy of the individuals involved.

While the author has made every effort to provide accurate internet addresses at the time of publication, neither the publisher nor the author assumes any responsibility for errors or for changes that occur after publication. Further, the publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

pid_prh_6.0_139201561_c0_r0

To my guru

*Blessed are those whose strength is in you,
whose hearts are set on pilgrimage.
As they pass through the Valley of Baka,
they make it a place of springs;
the autumn rains also cover it with pools.
They go from strength to strength,
till each appears before God in Zion.*

PSALM 84: 5–7

Contents

INTRODUCTION

The Man on the Plane Who Changed My Life

CHAPTER 1

Your Professional Decline Is Coming (Much) Sooner Than You Think

CHAPTER 2

The Second Curve

CHAPTER 3

Kick Your Success Addiction

CHAPTER 4

Start Chipping Away

CHAPTER 5

Ponder Your Death

CHAPTER 6

Cultivate Your Aspen Grove

CHAPTER 7

Start Your Vanaprastha

CHAPTER 8

Make Your Weakness Your Strength

CHAPTER 9

Cast into the Falling Tide

CONCLUSION

Seven Words to Remember

Acknowledgments

Notes

Index

INTRODUCTION



The Man on the Plane Who Changed My Life

“IT’S NOT TRUE that no one needs you anymore.”

These exasperated words came from an elderly woman sitting behind me on a late-night flight from Los Angeles to Washington, DC. The plane was dark and quiet, and most people were either sleeping or watching a movie. I was working on my laptop, feverishly trying to finish something now completely lost to memory but that at the time seemed to be of crucial importance to my life, happiness, and future.

A man I assumed to be her husband murmured almost inaudibly in response.

Again, his wife: “Oh, stop saying it would be better if you were dead.”

Now they had my full attention. I didn’t mean to eavesdrop but couldn’t help it. I listened half with human empathy and half with the professional fascination of a social scientist. I formed an image of the husband in my head. I imagined someone who had worked hard all his life in relative obscurity; someone disappointed at his dreams unfulfilled—perhaps the career he never pursued, the schools he never attended, the company he never started. Now, I imagined, he was forced to retire, tossed aside like yesterday’s news.

As the lights switched on after touchdown, I finally got a look at the desolate man. I was shocked: I recognized him—he was well-known; famous, even. Then in his mideighties, he has been universally beloved as

a hero for his courage, patriotism, and accomplishments of many decades ago. I have admired him since I was young.

As he passed up the aisle of the plane behind me, passengers recognized him and murmured with veneration. Standing at the door of the cockpit, the pilot recognized him and said, echoing my own thoughts, “Sir, I have admired you since I was a little boy.” The older man—apparently wishing for death just a few minutes earlier—beamed at the recognition of his past glories.

I wondered: Which more accurately describes the man—the one filled with joy and pride right now, or the one twenty minutes ago, telling his wife he might as well be dead?

• • •

I COULDN'T GET the cognitive dissonance of that scene out of my mind over the following weeks.

It was the summer of 2012, shortly after my forty-eighth birthday. I was not world-famous like the man on the plane, but my professional life was going pretty well. I was the president of a prominent Washington, DC, think tank that was prospering. I had written some bestselling books. People came to my speeches. My columns were published in *The New York Times*.

I had found a list written on my fortieth birthday, eight years earlier, of my professional goals—those that, if accomplished, would (I was sure) bring me satisfaction. I had met or exceeded all of them. And yet . . . I wasn't particularly satisfied or happy. I had gotten my heart's desire, at least as I imagined it, but it didn't bring the joy I envisioned.

And even if it *did* deliver satisfaction, could I really keep this going? If I stayed at it seven days a week, twelve hours a day—which I basically did, with my eighty-hour workweeks—at some point my progress would slow and stop. Many days I was thinking this flowing had already started. And what then? Would I wind up looking back on my life and telling my long-suffering wife, Ester, that *I* might as well be dead? Was there any way to get off the hamster wheel of success and accept inevitable professional decline with grace? Maybe even turn it into opportunity?

• • •

THOUGH THESE QUESTIONS WERE PERSONAL, I decided to approach them as the social scientist I am, treating them as a research project. It felt unnatural—like a surgeon taking out his own appendix. I plunged ahead, however, and for the last nine years I have been on a personal quest to turn my future from a matter of dread to an opportunity for progress.

I delved into divergent literatures, from my own field in social science to adjacent work in brain science, philosophy, theology, and history. I dug into the biographies of some of the most successful people in history. I immersed myself in the research on people who strive for excellence and interviewed hundreds of leaders, from heads of state to hardware-store owners.

What I found was a hidden source of anguish that wasn't just widespread but nearly universal among people who have done well in their careers. I came to call this the “striver's curse”: people who strive to be excellent at what they do often wind up finding their inevitable decline terrifying, their successes increasingly unsatisfying, and their relationships lacking.

The good news is that I also discovered what I was looking for: a way to escape the curse. Methodically, I built a strategic plan for the rest of my life, giving me the chance to have a second half of adulthood that is not only not disappointing but happier and more meaningful than the first.

But I quickly realized that creating a private life plan wasn't good enough. I had to share it. The secrets I found were available to anyone with a will to live a life of joy and purpose—and willing to do the work to achieve it. Unlike the world we have tried to conquer earlier in life, here there was no competition for the prizes. We can all succeed and all be happier. And that is why I have written this book for you, my fellow striver.

The fact that you picked up this book tells me you have most likely achieved success through hard work, huge sacrifice, and uncompromising excellence. (And let's be honest—probably no small amount of good luck, too.) You deserve a lot of praise and admiration, and you've probably gotten it. But you know intellectually that you can't keep this party going

forever, and you might even already see the signs that it is coming to an end. Unfortunately, you never gave much thought to the party's end, so you only really have one strategy: Try to keep it going. Deny change and work harder.

But that is a sure path to misery. In my field of economics, we have something called "Stein's law," named after the famous economist Herbert Stein from the 1970s: "If something cannot go on forever, it will stop."^[1] Obvious, right? Well, when it comes to their own lives, people ignore it all the time. But you ignore this about your professional success at your peril. It will leave you falling further and further behind, shaking your fist at the heavens.

There is another path, though: Instead of denying change in your abilities, you can make the change itself a source of strength. Instead of trying to avoid decline, you can transcend it by finding a *new* kind of success, better than what the world promises and not a source of neurosis and addiction; a *deeper* form of happiness than what you had before; and, in the process, *true* meaning in life—maybe for the first time. The process is what I lay out in this book. It has changed my life, and it can change yours, too.

A word of caution, though: This path means going against many of your striverly instincts. I'm going to ask you not to deny your weaknesses but rather to embrace them defenselessly. To let go of some things in your life that you worked hard for—but that are now holding you back. To adopt parts of life that will make you happy, even if they don't make you *special*. To face decline—and even death—with courage and confidence. To rebuild the relationships you neglected on the long road to worldly success. And to dive into the uncertainty of a transition you have worked so hard to evade.

None of this is easy—it's hard to teach an old striver new tricks! It takes great effort to accept ideas that might have seemed crazy when you were doing everything under your power to be truly great at your worldly vocation. But I promise you the payoff will be worth it. I—and you—can get happier every year.

We can go from strength to strength.

CHAPTER 1



Your Professional Decline Is Coming (Much) Sooner Than You Think

WHO ARE THE five greatest scientists who have ever lived? This is the kind of question people like to debate in nerdy corners of the internet that you probably don't visit, and I don't intend to take you there. But no matter how much or little you know about science, your list is sure to contain Charles Darwin. He is remembered today as a man who changed our understanding of biology completely and permanently. So profound was his influence that his celebrity has never wavered since his death in 1882.

And yet Darwin died considering his career to be a disappointment.

Let's back up. Darwin's parents wanted him to be a clergyman, a career for which he had little enthusiasm or aptitude. As such, he was a lackluster student. His true love was science, which made him feel happy and alive. So it was the opportunity of a lifetime to him—"by far the most important event in my life," he later called it—when, in 1831 at age twenty-two, he was invited to join the voyage of *The Beagle*, a scientific sailing investigation around the world. For the next five years aboard the ship, he collected exotic plant and animal samples, sending them back to England to the fascination of scientists and the general public.

This was impressive enough to make him pretty well-known. When he returned home at age twenty-seven, however, he started an intellectual fire with his theory of natural selection, the idea that over generations, species change and adapt, giving us the multiplicity of plants and animals we see

after hundreds of millions of years. Over the next thirty years, he developed his theory and published it in books and essays, his reputation growing steadily. In 1859, at age fifty, he published his magnum opus and crowning achievement, *On the Origin of Species*, a bestseller explaining his theory of evolution that made him into a household name and changed science forever.

At this point, however, Darwin's work stagnated creatively: he hit a wall in his research and could not make new breakthroughs. Around that same time, a Czech monk by the name of Gregor Mendel discovered what Darwin needed to continue his work: the theory of genetics. Unfortunately, Mendel's work was published in an obscure German academic journal and Darwin never saw it—and in any case, Darwin (who, remember, had been an unmotivated student) did not have the mathematical or language skills to understand it. Despite his writing numerous books later in life, his work after that broke little ground.

In his last years, Darwin was still very famous—indeed, after his death he was buried as a national hero in Westminster Abbey—but he was increasingly unhappy about his life, seeing his work as unsatisfying, unsatisfactory, and unoriginal. “I have not the heart or strength at my age to begin any investigations lasting years, which is the only thing which I enjoy,” he confessed to a friend. “I have everything to make me happy and contented, but life has become very wearisome to me.”^[1]

Darwin was successful by the world's standards, washed up by his own. He knew that by all worldly rights, he had everything to make him “happy and contented” but confessed that his fame and fortune were now like eating straw. Only progress and new successes such as he enjoyed in his past work could cheer him up—and this was now beyond his abilities. So he was consigned to unhappiness in his decline. Darwin's melancholy did not abate, by all accounts, before he died at seventy-three.

I'd like to be able to tell you that Darwin's decline and unhappiness in old age were as rare as his achievements, but that's not true. In fact, Darwin's decline was completely normal, and right on schedule. And if you, like Darwin, have worked hard to be exceptional at what you do, you will almost certainly face a similar pattern of decline and disappointment—and it will come much, much sooner than you think.

The surprising earliness of decline

Unless you follow the James Dean formula—“Live fast, die young, leave a good-looking corpse”—you know that your professional, physical, and mental decline is inevitable. You probably just think it’s a long, long way off.

You’re not alone in thinking this. For most people, the implicit belief is that aging and its effect on professional performance are something that happen far in the future. This attitude explains all kinds of funny survey results. For example, when asked in 2009 what “being old” means, the most popular response among Americans was “turning eighty-five.”^[2] In other words, the average American (who lives to seventy-nine) dies six years before entering old age.

Here is the reality: in practically every high-skill profession, decline sets in sometime between one’s late thirties and early fifties. Sorry, I know that stings. And it gets worse: the more accomplished one is at the peak of one’s career, the more pronounced decline seems once it has set in.

Obviously, you aren’t just going to take my word for this, so let’s take a look at the evidence.

We’ll start with the most obvious, and earliest, decline: athletes. Those playing sports requiring explosive power or sprinting see peak performance from twenty to twenty-seven years of age, while those playing endurance sports peak a bit later—but still as young adults.^[3] No surprise there—no one expects a serious athlete to remain competitive until age sixty, and most of the athletes I talked to for this book (there aren’t any surveys asking when people expect to experience their physical decline, so I started doing so informally) figured they would have to find a new line of work by the time they were thirty. They don’t love this reality, but they generally face it.

It’s a much different story for what we now call “knowledge workers”—most people reading this book, I would guess. Among people in professions requiring ideas and intellect rather than athletic skill and significant physical strength, almost no one admits expecting decline before their seventies; some later than that. Unlike athletes, however, they are *not* facing reality.

Take scientists. Benjamin Jones, a professor of strategy and entrepreneurship at the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, has spent years studying when people are most likely to make prizewinning scientific discoveries and key inventions. Looking at major inventors and Nobel winners going back more than a century, Jones finds that the most common age for great discovery is one's late thirties. He shows that the likelihood of a major discovery increases steadily through one's twenties and thirties and then declines dramatically through one's forties, fifties, and sixties. There are outliers, of course. But the probability of producing a major innovation at age seventy is approximately equal to what it was at age twenty—about zero.^[4]

That fact no doubt inspired Paul Dirac, the Nobel Prize-winning physicist, to pen a little melancholy verse about how age is every physicist's curse. It ends with these two lines:

*He is better dead than living still
when once he is past his thirtieth year.*

Dirac won the prize when he was thirty-one years old, for work he had done in his midtwenties. By his thirtieth birthday, he had developed a general theory of the quantum field, the area in which he had earned his PhD at Cambridge (at age twenty-four). At twenty-eight he wrote *The Principles of Quantum Mechanics*, a textbook still in use today. At thirty he was a chaired professor at Cambridge. And after that? He was an active scholar and made a few breakthroughs. But it was nothing like the early years. Hence his poem.

Of course, Nobel winners might be different than ordinary scientists. Jones, with a coauthor, dug deeper into the data on researchers in physics, chemistry, and medicine who had highly cited work, as well as patents and various prizes. They found that peak performance is occurring at later ages than in the past, principally because the knowledge required to do cutting-edge work has increased so much over the decades. Still, since 1985, the peak age is not old: for physicists, fifty; for chemistry, forty-six; and for medicine, forty-five. After that, innovation drops precipitously.

Other knowledge fields follow the same basic pattern. For writers, decline sets in between about forty and fifty-five.^[5] Financial professionals reach peak performance between the ages of thirty-six and forty.^[6] Or take doctors: they appear to peak in their thirties, with steep drop-offs in skill as the years pass.^[7] It's sort of reassuring to have a doctor who reminds people my age of Marcus Welby, MD. However, one recent Canadian study looked at 80 percent of the country's anesthesiologists and patient litigation against them over a ten-year period. The researchers found that physicians over sixty-five are 50 percent more likely than younger doctors (under fifty-one) at being found at fault for malpractice.

Entrepreneurs are an interesting case when it comes to peak age. Tech founders often earn vast fame and fortune in their twenties but many are in creative decline by age thirty. The *Harvard Business Review* has reported that founders of enterprises backed with \$1 billion or more in venture capital tend to cluster in the twenty to thirty-four age range. The number of founders older than this, they discovered, is low. Other scholars dispute this finding, claiming that the average age of the founders of the highest-growth start-ups is, in fact, forty-five.^[8] But the point remains the same: by middle age, entrepreneurial ability is plummeting. Even by the most optimistic estimates, only about 5 percent of founders are over sixty.

The pattern isn't limited to knowledge work; noticeable age-related decline comes earlier than people think in skilled jobs from policing to nursing. Peak performance is thirty-five to forty-four for equipment-service engineers and office workers; it is forty-five to fifty-four for semiskilled assembly workers and mail sorters.^[9] The age-related decline among air-traffic controllers is so sharp—and the consequences of decline-related errors so dire—that the mandatory retirement age is fifty-six.^[10]

Decline is so predictable that one scholar has built an eerily accurate model to predict it in specific professions. Dean Keith Simonton from the University of California, Davis, studied the pattern of professional decline among people in creative professions and built a model that estimates the shape of the average person's career. Fitting curves to gigabytes of data, he created a graph that looks like figure 1.

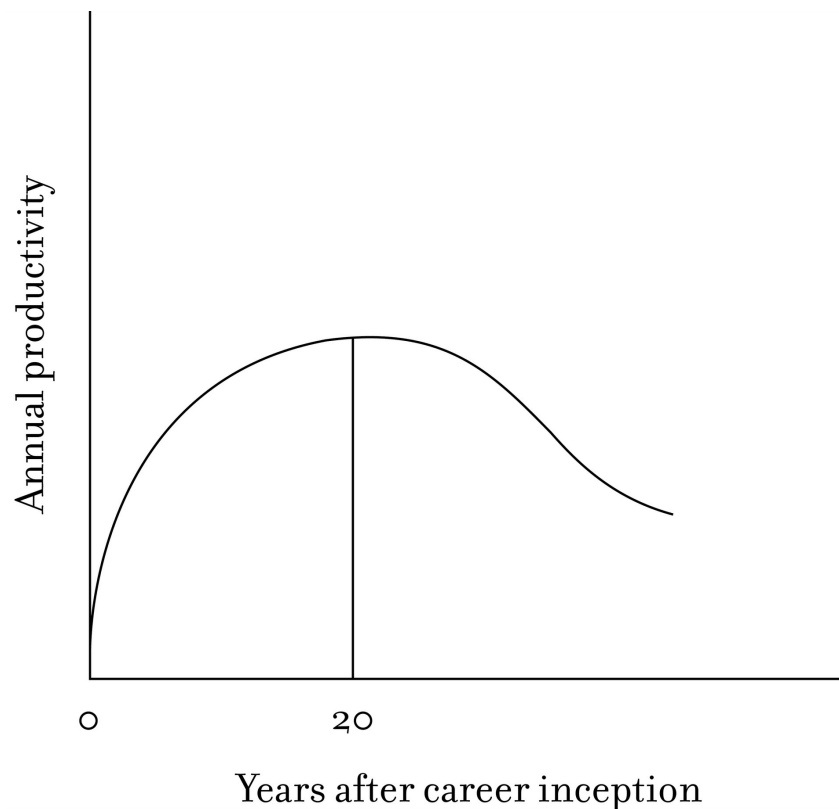


Figure 1. Average work productivity after career inception for creative and scholarly careers^[11]

On average, the peak of creative careers occurs at about twenty years after career inception, hence the finding that people usually start declining somewhere between thirty-five and fifty. This is averaged across lots of fields, however, and Simonton found a fair amount of variation. For example, he has looked at the “half-life” of many professions—the age at which half of one’s work has been produced. That would more or less correspond, on average, with the highest point in the graph. A group that closely tracks this twenty-year half-life is novelists, who generally do half their work before, and half after, 20.4 years from the start of their writing careers. Also close to this are mathematicians, who have a half-life of 21.7 years. Slightly earlier are poets, who hit their half-life after 15.4 years. Slightly later are geologists, at 28.9 years.

Let’s think what this means for a moment. Say you are involved in a quantitative field—you are a data analyst, for example. If you finish your education and start your career at twenty-two, you will, on average, hit your professional peak at forty-four and then start to see your skills decline. Now say you are a poet—freshly minted with a master of fine arts

degree at age twenty-five. Simonton's data show that you will burn through half your life's work by about age forty and be in productivity decline after that. On the other hand, if you are a geologist, your peak will tend to come closer to fifty-four.

For me, early decline is personal

When I started this research, I was especially keen to see if the decline patterns applied to musicians, especially classical musicians. There are some famous cases of classical musicians who go on and on, performing into old age. In 1945, double bass player Jane Little joined the Atlanta Symphony at the tender age of sixteen. She retired seventy-one years later at the age of eighty-seven. (Well, she didn't exactly retire: she actually died onstage during a concert while performing "There's No Business Like Show Business.")^[12]

Ms. Little is not the norm, however; most retire much earlier. And arguably, retirement happens too late. In surveys, classical musicians report that peak performance occurs in one's thirties. Younger players often groan over the prime spots occupied by older players with tenure—orchestras have tenure just like universities—who hang around long after they've lost their edge. The problem is, these older players often can't admit decline even to themselves. "It's very hard to admit that it's time," said one fifty-eight-year-old French horn player in the Pittsburgh Symphony Orchestra. "We're expert at denial. We have been successful because we refuse to accept the overwhelming odds at making it in our profession, so early in our development denial is a positive."^[13]

That French horn player wasn't me. But it could have been, in a parallel life.

As a child, in fact, I had just one goal: to be the world's greatest French horn player. I practiced my horn slavishly, hours and hours a day, playing in any ensemble I could find. I had pictures of famous horn players on my bedroom wall for inspiration. I went to all the best music festivals and studied with the greatest teachers available to a lower-middle-class kid in Seattle. I was always the best player, the first chair.

For a while, I thought my young life's dream might come true. At nineteen, I left college to take a job playing professionally in a touring chamber-music ensemble. We played one hundred concerts a year, driving around the country in an oversized van. I didn't have health insurance and rent day was always nerve-wracking, but by the age of twenty-one I had seen all fifty states and fifteen foreign countries and made albums that occasionally I would hear on the radio. My dream was to rise through the classical-music ranks in my twenties, join a top symphony orchestra in a few years, and then become a soloist—the most exalted job a classical musician can hold.

But then, in my early twenties, a strange thing happened: I started getting worse. To this day, I have no idea why. My technique began to suffer, and I had no explanation for it. Nothing helped. I visited famous teachers and practiced more, but I couldn't get back to where I had been. Pieces that had been easy to play became hard; pieces that had been hard became impossible.

Perhaps the worst moment in my young but flailing career was at Carnegie Hall in New York City. While delivering a short speech about the music I was about to play, I stepped forward, lost my footing, and fell off the stage into the audience. On the way home from the concert, I mused darkly that the experience was surely a message from God.

Whether from God or not, I didn't listen to that message. I had no concept of myself apart from "great French horn player." I would rather have died than given up.

I sputtered along for nine more years. At twenty-five, I took a position in the City Orchestra of Barcelona, where I increased my practicing but my playing continued to deteriorate. After a few years, I found a job teaching at a small music conservatory in Florida, hoping for a magical turnaround that never materialized.

Realizing that maybe I ought to hedge my bets, without telling a soul but my wife (I felt ashamed) I went back to college via distance learning. I never met a professor or set foot in a classroom and earned my bachelor's degree in economics a month before my thirtieth birthday. For me, graduation day meant walking out to the mailbox in my slippers to pick up

my diploma. On the envelope was prominently written DO NOT FOLD. It was folded.

I secretly continued my studies at night, earning a master's degree in economics a year later. I kept up my practicing and continued to make my living as a musician all the while, hoping against hope that I'd see a comeback in my skills.

It didn't happen. And so, at thirty-one, I admitted defeat: I was never going to turn around my faltering musical career. But what else to do with my life? I reluctantly went into the family business. My father was an academic; his father was an academic. I abandoned my musical aspirations and started a PhD.

Life goes on, right? Sort of. After finishing my studies, I became a university professor engaged in social science research and teaching—work I enjoyed a lot. But I still thought every day about my beloved first, and true, vocation. Even now, I regularly dream that I am onstage. I can hear the orchestra and see the audience. I am in the zone of blissful musical flow, playing better than ever . . . and I wake to remember that my childhood aspirations are now only phantasms.

In truth, I'm lucky. I now know that my decline was coming, and I just got it a decade or two earlier than is ordinarily the case. As such, I was able to accommodate it early enough that I could redirect my life into a new line of intellectual work. Still, to this day, the sting of that early decline makes these words difficult to write. I vowed to myself that it wouldn't ever happen to me again.

But of course, the data don't lie: it *will* happen again.

Why we decline, and how it affects us

For most people, decline is not just an unwelcome surprise; it is also a huge mystery. We learn early on that practice makes perfect; there is plenty of research telling us that mastery comes from ten thousand hours of work, or some really high number like that. In other words, life has a formula: the more you do something, the better at it you become.