Examining life in terms of thirds

I like to think of life in thirds. The first third (one to thirty) we spend in incubation, education, preparation, exploring identity and purpose, intimacy and relationships. The second third (thirty to sixty) is dominated by family and work: we define our core relationships and commit to a career path. The third third (sixty to ninety) encounters the unexplored terrain of life after the working career. This country has been visited by many, but traditionally the stay has been short. For years “retirement” was expected around sixty-five with leisure to fill the remaining ten to fifteen years. But that has all changed. Now, we have a new world to explore.

What has changed? First, health. Turning sixty is not necessarily the beginning of decline. At sixty-five many are vigorous and hopeful, with energy to invest and contributions to make. Second, longevity. The health that enlivens us at sixty-five could sustain us for another thirty years. The journey ahead is much longer than it used to be.

Third, new explorers are arriving in large numbers.

Beginning January 1, 2011, every day for the next fifteen years, eight thousand men and women in the United States will turn sixty-five. In unprecedented numbers we are asking, What now? Traditional retirement has been discarded, discounted or denied as lifetimes grow longer. For many, retirement at sixty-five is not financially possible. For others the idea of thirty or more years of unproductive time is frightening. For most men and women the decision has been pushed out into the future, and we enter the new world of the third third of life without a plan or a purpose.

When I look for a model or a template to gauge my own exploration of the third third, I naturally look to the mentor I have dialogued with about life and work for nearly three decades. The third third has been the particular topic of a conversation with Max De Pree, the former CEO of Herman Miller, Inc., over the past several years. I am now sixty-eight. Max is eighty-seven. We have been in a mentoring relationship for over twenty-five years, during which I have drawn on Max’s wisdom and experience as I negotiate the leadership journey and the stages of life. Thus emerged the
conversation that rests beneath this study guide. Together we unpacked the questions that the new journey raises, analyzed the fears embedded in uncharted wilderness, and pondered the opportunities for learning, growth, contribution and joy.

—From the introduction, “A Conversation with Max De Pree About Life After Sixty”

Walter C. Wright, Ph.D., is executive director of the Max De Pree Center for Leadership in Pasadena. He served for twelve years as president and professor of leadership at Regent College in Vancouver, Canada. Wright is the author of three books on leadership and speaks to organizations throughout the world.
The questions of a lifetime

In this brief workbook Walter C. Wright provides eight sessions to help those moving toward retirement plan out their next steps. Developed and fieldtested at the Max De Pree Center for Leadership, this guide includes material for individuals and groups that will enable fiftysomethings (and up) to prepare for the next chapter of life with confidence.

“I hope this guide keeps before you the questions, Who do I intend to be? How can my gifts be of service now? Will I finish with joy and meaning?”
—From the foreword by Max O. De Pree

What are the six tasks to be mastered in a lifetime?

What steps can we take to transition out of a midlife career?

The median age at which people expect to retire has advanced from sixty-four to sixty-nine over the past fifteen years. Why has this number risen?

In what ways do people approach retirement differently today than they did twenty or thirty years ago?

“The Pew Research Center found that the gap between actual age and ‘felt age’ widens as we grow older. About half of the eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds surveyed say that they feel their actual age, while 25 percent feel older. At age fifty the felt age drops ten years below actual age, and between sixty-five and seventy-four the gap is closer to nineteen or twenty years younger. We feel younger, so we work longer.”
—From session two, “Transitioning Out of a Midlife Career”

What fears and hopes do people experience as they enter the third third of life?

“Memory loss is a significant fear for nearly 60 percent of those under sixty-five, but is a reality for only 25 percent of those over sixty-five. Not being able to drive is a fear for close to half of those under sixty-five, but again, a reality for only 14 percent of those over sixty-five. Similarly,
serious illness in old age is expected twice as much as it is experienced in reality. And it is important to note that these numbers include those over eighty-five, when many of the fears are realized, but even then less than half of men and women over eighty-five experience these liabilities.”
—From session three, “Facing Fears—Embracing Hope”

What are encore careers?
“Preparing for the future is the agenda of life even as we live fully in the present today: Am I learning? Am I contributing? Who do I love? These questions of today point to the questions of tomorrow: What do I want to learn next? What can I offer? Whose company will I cherish? The third third offers a window on tomorrow as we choose the way forward on the journey of life.”

—From the conclusion, “So, What Now?”