

**Excerpt from *Who Do You Want to Be When You Grow Old? The Path of Purposeful Aging*  
by Richard J. Leider and David A. Shapiro (Berrett-Koehler, 2021)**

**From the Default Life and to the Good Life**

The “choice” that’s the absence of a choice is called the “default choice”—like in online shopping where the “default choice” is having your billing address and your shipping address be the same. Default choices are useful because they promote efficiency. No need to make a decision when we don’t really have to; just proceed by default and get on with things.

But while the default choice may be the way to go for such simple things in life, it’s less than ideal as overall approach to life itself. Just floating along from one year to the next, accepting things as they present themselves without question or intention is surefire recipe for dissatisfaction and despair in later life.

Living the “default life” is living a life that’s ultimately inauthentic and impersonal; it’s living a life that isn’t really of our own choosing. It’s living a life that inevitably gives rise to questions like “Where did all the time go?” “How did my life pass so quickly?” And “Why did I squander my one precious opportunity for living?”

We often unconsciously live our lives by default; in fact, that’s a big part of what it means to do so. For most people in the second half of life, the default version of adulthood was unquestioned: you were done with your education and settled into a job or career that paid the bills. You found a mate, got married, and bought a small starter home; you were on your own at last! And oh, all this before you turned 25. The default path to becoming a grownup was short and direct—and usually for life.

Today, there are many more exceptions to becoming a grownup. These days, adulthood is more of a choice than a set path with specific milestones. Outward markers have lost the power to entirely define our options.

Along with this is, not surprisingly, a similar shift in what it means to be old. The traditional milestones of old age—retirement, the death of one’s parents, grandchildren, etc.—are no longer definitive of what it means to be old. Now, it’s more about choices; we’re freer now to decide for ourselves what being old means and how we intend to live our later years. But that requires us to confront default choices and reject easy answers. It means honestly exploring tough questions like, “Am I really living my life or someone else’s version of it?” And “What’s missing in my life?”

It’s typical for people to feel that something “big” is missing in their lives. To the extent that this is a result of having lived a default life is up for review, but there’s no doubt that many of us find ourselves at a point in our lives where what’s missing can no longer be overlooked. We’re wondering how to fill that hole in our lives before our most precious currency—time—is completely spent.

That the missing component is not a function of having avoided pain; death and suffering are a fact of life. Rather, what seems to be lacking can be narrowed down to an unexamined aspect of one or more factors that contribute to our experience of the good life: These are *Place*: (where we live); *People*: (who we spend their time with); *Life Work*: (what we do all day, every day); and *Purpose*: (why we do what they do.)

The sense of something missing that people of any age feel can be traced, in no small part, to one of these four areas. And the reason for that emptiness, more often than not, is that

people have opted to live a default life. Moving from the default life to the good life, therefore, is a matter of becoming intentional about place, people, life work, and/or purpose.

Choosing to change just one of the four areas is likely to result in a significant shift in attitude. Things might get better or they might get worse, at least initially; we can never know until the change is made. This uncertainty is enough to keep people stuck in default living—especially in later life, when those default choices are so ingrained.

Moreover, for many people, the very idea of making conscious choices about these major life structures is pretty foreign; typically, we didn't initially choose our place, our people, our life work, and our purpose; they chose us! So, to move from the default life to the good life means being intentional about our choices, asking ourselves these questions about place, people, work, and purpose.

*Where is my true place?*

Our place, where we live, is typically the most common default choice, and, yet, it may have the biggest effect of all, since, in many ways, it determines all the rest. We're born somewhere we didn't choose; we grow up there, and we stay. If we move, it's often not really a "choice;" it's for a job, or a relationship, or to go to school. Of course, some people do set off somewhere new in hopes of finding happiness, or adventure, but they're in the minority—and recent statistics show that minority is shrinking. So, most of us settle into place by default and become too settled to seriously consider moving.

*Who are my real people?*

People, our family, for sure, but also friends and acquaintances, are often in our lives as defaults. The people in our lives are usually the people who have happened to become the people in our lives. They were the people around us as we grew up, got jobs, moved into

neighborhoods, and started families. How many of us make great new friends later in life? It's possible, but unusual. Our scope of relationships, in fact, often narrows. Once we're settled in our relationships, we become complacent and stop actively looking for friends who really resonate with our values and interests—if we ever did so at all. So, we withdraw once again, and settle.

*What is my life's work?*

Our work, what we end up spending the majority of our lifetime doing, often depended on what we saw as our options when we were starting to enter the working world. We went with what our parents or teachers recommended or whatever seemed to make sense at the time or simply what paid the bills. The result—decades spent making a living in some way—is more or less happenstance by default. We didn't choose our work; it chose us. In later life, it's often the same story. Our later life work might be volunteer, paid, unpaid, creative hobbies, or entrepreneurship; the majority of people don't or can't retire. But to the extent that those options have chosen us, we're working by default.

*What is my "why?"—my purpose?*

And our purpose, our vital sense of why we're doing all this, anyway, is often the least examined aspect of our lives of all. Very few of us consciously choose our purpose, until faced with a crisis, which is why, of course, so many people, especially in later life, feel that sense of missing "something big."

If we accept the premise that living a purposeful life is preferable to a default life, why is it that so many people grow up without intentionally choosing the life they want? Fear is the major deterrent: fear of contradicting the default expectations of others, fear of being broke, fear

of taking a stand as an individual, and perhaps most of all, fear of confronting feelings of isolation.

We've all seen the Hallmark card/bumper-sticker slogan, "Today is the first day of the rest of your life." Perhaps, a more relevant way of putting it should be "Today is the last day of my life and I'm going to live it as if I don't have any more."

Overcoming our fears and choosing not to settle is a great challenge of later life. So much of our earlier lives consist of conditions we've fallen into and made the best of. We gravitate unconsciously towards what's comfortable. When we choose to grow old, though, (rather than merely get old) is when we can step back and see where we've come from, to finally live our own version of a good life.

The "secret" to ending default living is really no secret at all: Be yourself—full stop. That means not being dependent on the approval of others, but rather, consciously choosing to be your own person, not by default, but on purpose.