

**RE-CAREERING REPLACING RETIREMENT:
from the introduction to *Moving from the Mindless Myths to Meaning
and Money at Mid-Life*, by Helen Harkness, Ph.D.**

The necessity for me to **Capitalize on Chaos**, both personal and professional, and to **Re-Career and Forget Retirement, and make a living** for myself and three children started in 1970 when my occupation as a full-time mother and physician's wife ended. I had sent my husband to medical school instead of going myself, demonstrating the 1950's Silent Generation wife syndrome. I immediately dashed back to chase a Ph.D. in English, and the dream that I had since I'd read in the 1960's that if a woman got a Ph.D., she could become a university president! Wow – that was a real challenge to aim for!

However, after six years of part-time graduate classes, while teaching at a private college, which later closed with a bang and a whimper, and within six hours and a dissertation, I realized that with a dime and a Ph.D. in English, that I could get a cup of coffee! The career chaos that is currently hitting our economy hit higher education during the 1970's. Ph.D.'s were painting houses, driving taxis, and barely clearing minimum wages for part-time teaching at community colleges. Only one out of nine, frequently non-tenured gypsy scholars, were getting into academe.

This reality became clear to me when I was in one of the hidden carrels at the university library, researching Chaucer and the Black Plague of the 13th Century. Someone (I believe it was Lily Tomlin) said that when you speak to God, it's prayer, but when he speaks to you it's schizophrenia! So I had a schizophrenic moment: "*Helen, what are you doing here?! You have three teenagers in a crazy world where the cops are more dangerous than the robbers. You can't get a decent job with this – get out and get on with your life!*"

And I did exactly that! I had read Alvin Toffler's *Future Shock* instead of Shakespeare with my freshman English class, and he predicted 3–5 career changes during a person's life. At

about the same time the financial specialist Sylvia Porter envisioned from 5–7 career changes. With this in mind, I switched academic departments and found a supportive professor – Dr. Roderic Duchemin, a great man who taught educational philosophy courses focusing on the future. When I told him I wanted to focus on adults changing careers, I remember that he said: “Mrs. Harkness, I have no idea what you are talking about, but you seem to know, so I will support your focus.”

I researched thoroughly throughout the country (this was in the mid 1970s), and completed probably the first dissertation in the US on career change issues. After graduation, I applied for and received two grants from the US Department of Labor which enabled me to open the first free combined career and social services center in the country. This groundbreaking one-stop center was based in the public library where I had served on the library board for years. To get started, I immediately trained eight career counselors, and we documented contact with 6,000 citizens – 3,000 attended our career workshops, and we assisted another 3,000 via telephone.

After two years at the center I started my business, Career Design Associates, Inc., in 1978. Ironically, I couldn’t even get a listing in the Yellow Pages since at the time a “career” category didn’t exist! In addition, I was firmly admonished by a respected university professor of marketing that I simply could not operate out of my 6,000 square foot house, which I had just rebuilt after a fire caused by aluminum wiring destroyed the home only four months after moving in. He claimed that I’d have zero credibility! Happily, I defied his pronouncement, and 72 percent of the house is used for office space; 28 percent is reserved for living space. Today most of us agree that working from home is ideal!

Another story connected to this is that I had often seen businesses with “Inc.” after their names, and I believed that this tag might help give me this credibility. So I called up my young lawyer, telling him only that I wanted to meet with him and “talk about my future.” When I arrived at his office, I found that he, as a trustee in a large bank, had laid out my financial future

on his desk. He recommended putting everything in a trust so I could retire. *I was shocked!* *Retire?* It is true that many of my friends were married to men who were taking early retirement.

When I returned home I looked in the mirror, and saw not Snow White, but the Wicked Witch of the West! I had recently read some research that indicated people trusted “unlined faces.” Since lines and longevity abound in my genes, I did my homework and found the best plastic surgeon around. I told him, “Erase every visible line possible from the neck up.” And he did, for \$5,000. I considered it a major business start-up cost; however, the IRS didn’t quite see it that way.

So I was off and running at age 50 – defying conventional wisdom and myths of aging on every hand! This was the way I handled my own career on the edge of chaos, 36 years ago. Know this: The chaos didn’t end, but I did understand my purpose to pursue with passion, which was and is to *help adults redesign their careers*. This was based on a very real current and future need in our society, and I had developed a plan to achieve it. I will certainly continue this as long as I can be highly useful to others who choose (or are being forced) to re-career at mid-life. They may also choose to discover the meaning that would allow them to work until age 100, which I have every intention of doing, since centenarians are the fastest growing age group, and the statistics are claiming that from 13 percent down to 5 percent will develop Alzheimer’s.

How I will accomplish my goal to “die young - as late as possible” is the focus of a book, *Moving from the Mindless Myths to Meaning and Money at Mid-Life*. I will write this after I complete the current one I’m writing, *Reading, Writing, Arithmetic and REALITY*, focusing on determining possible career focus for middle, high school and college students, parents and teachers. Do watch for it! This is a product of the nonprofit – Career Design Foundation (www.careerdesignfoundation.org), founded in late 2013.