

What to Make of a Life

Jim Collins

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BOOK CLUB SYNOPSIS

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1. A LIFE TRANSFORMED

Early in Jim Collins' life, he experienced a number of challenges caused by his parents' tumultuous relationship. Over time, it resulted in his father's leaving and their subsequent divorce. A trip to visit his father left Collins disappointed, and their relationship ended. The experience—which he describes as his “first big cliff in life”—led him to ponder questions that years later served as the seeds for this book: “How to get through the befuddling terrain of youth? How to find a path? How to become an adult? What to do with this one amazing gift of a single life to live? I didn't know, and I didn't know how to know.”

This question about what to make of your life is not to be asked and answered a single time, but rather revisited numerous times throughout your life. It may be particularly relevant in the aftermath of some kind of cliff or big change.

Collins undertook a 10-year research project looking into the lives of dozens of people at different phases of life and seeking commonalities. From an initial group of 500, he narrowed down the study to 34 people, looking at their lives before, during, and after a cliff event, which he defines as “a significant event that alters the trajectory of life and forces choices about what's next.” He chose cliffs as the lens because these life-changing moments happen to everyone. What matters is how you handle a cliff and what you choose to do next. This also allowed Collins to put the people he studied into matched pairs, seeing how similar situations played out for each of them and where they diverged.

The resulting book is decidedly not self-help, but what he calls “self-knowledge.” It is broken into three parts: first, looking at how these individuals came into frame, then how they navigated periods of feeling lost, and finally, exploring how many of them had their most significant work later in life.

“Life does not happen in nice neatly prepackaged stages. Life is not linear; it is unfolding, layered, and organic.”

PART I: COMING INTO FRAME

2. ONE BIG THING

As a young person, Barbara McClintock was obsessed with studying and learning. She ended up becoming a geneticist almost by accident, without knowing that this was the path she was on. But the more she did the work, the more she loved it. She built her early career in academia but then hit a wall in her 30s due to the limited opportunities for women at the time. Obsessed with her work and seeking resources and freedom to do her research, she ended up at a research institute where she spent most of the rest of her career. Even after winning the Nobel Prize, her life largely didn't change. She loved "the actual *doing*" of the work and had no desire to stop.

Collins asserts that three reinforcing elements allowed McClintock to make this life for herself:

1. "She discovered and deployed a set of her encodings."
2. "She flipped the arrow of money."
3. "She focused the inner fire."

Encodings are innate capacities that exist within each person. They are not learned or created, but discovered. Collins found that McClintock, like everyone else in the study, didn't live for money; it was simply the means that allowed her to do the work she was encoded for. Those in the study also "focused their energies *in alignment with their encodings*." McClintock found "a personal hedgehog"—one big thing to pursue that tied together all three elements—and she operated "in hedgehog mode," organizing her life and channeling her energy toward this pursuit.

Grace Hopper—the other individual in McClintock's matched pair—was innately curious, always taking things apart to figure out how they worked. After joining the Navy, she ended up being assigned to a computation project at Harvard, an assignment to which she was incredibly well suited. This led to her becoming one of the first computer programmers. But, like

McClintock, she eventually hit the ceiling in a traditional academic institution and changed gears, going to work at an early computer company.

Hopper didn't just have an instinct for computers. She was skilled at creating teams that were willing to put in work beyond the confines of their job descriptions. She was adept at navigating bureaucracy and knew how to get big, ambitious projects across the finish line.

Throughout the book, Collins explores two lives at a similar or identical cliff event, looking at what their lives looked like up to and after the cliff. He found that no two lives looked the same, despite similar circumstances. The differences he uncovered helped him see that what worked for one person might not have worked for another.

Collins is deliberate about presenting pairs precisely because the contrasts are instructive. "This has profound implications for people finding their way in life, especially young people seeking to exit the fog of youth: Be wary of advice based on other people's specific experience. The advice might be well meaning, and perhaps even inspiring, but it might reflect their own encodings, which differ from *your* encodings."

Some, like McClintock, were narrowly focused—finding one hedgehog and staying with it. Others, like Hopper, were serial hedgehogs, drawing on various encodings, moving across roles, and even transitioning into second or even third pursuits as other encodings came into view.

Alan Page discovered his natural skills for football in high school. This carried him into a successful career in the NFL. But Page knew that one day he would have to retire from the sport. While football was his first hedgehog, the seeds for his second hedgehog were planted early, starting with a keen interest in the impact of the *Brown v. Board of Education* ruling and the TV show *Perry Mason*.

Page enrolled in law school while still playing for the NFL and eventually got his J.D. and passed the bar. That meant that by the time he retired, he was ready for his second hedgehog. He started in private practice but eventually found that he was drawn to serving in the higher courts. He went on to serve on the Minnesota Supreme Court for several decades.

These two hedgehogs were vastly different from each other, but Page happened to have different sets of encodings that suited him for each. Yet he still wasn't done. In his 70s, after retiring from the court, Page found a third path: building an education foundation.

Like Page, Carl Eller was well suited to football. The two played together for several seasons on the Minnesota Vikings. But Eller's second hedgehog looked very different from Page's: He had a personal quest to get sober, which eventually led to a role as a leader in his community. He became particularly focused on helping young people and athletes dealing with substance abuse.

His hedgehogs didn't stop there. In his 60s, Eller worked to serve retired professional football players, becoming the president of the Retired Players Association. Later still, he drew on a completely different set of encodings and became an accomplished ceramicist.

Both Page and Eller continued to activate different encodings throughout their lives, rejecting the notion that they could only find meaning in youth. Whether you find that you're made for one thing or several, going into hedgehog mode involves those three steps of finding and making use of your encodings, not seeing money as an end in itself, and remaining focused. Page's and Eller's lives illustrate the wide range of ways people answer the question of what to make of a life. Every person in Collins' study found a way to bring those three elements together into one big thing, intensely pursued over years if not decades.

3. A CONSTELLATION OF ENCODINGS

People's encodings don't change—some simply come into view at different moments in time. The people in the study seemed to achieve their greatest successes and be the happiest when they were doing things that were aligned with their encodings, which Collins refers to as being “in frame.”

From a young age, John Glenn was obsessed with planes and flying. But there wasn't immediately a clear path forward for him to pursue aviation. At age 19, he happened to come across a posting by the U.S. Department of Commerce looking for training pilots. He enrolled, and everything seemed to fall into place after that. He was naturally gifted at flying and thrived under pressure, keeping calm even under the most high-stakes circumstances. Through his career, he discovered other encodings, like a love for checklists, which was also well suited to his chosen career. His propensity for volunteering himself for roles that he wanted led him to becoming the first American to orbit Earth at age 40.

Gordon Cooper shared many of Glenn's traits: a knack for flying and the ability to stay calm. He also later became one of the original seven astronauts in Project Mercury. “Once he found himself in frame, he knew what he wanted to make of a big portion of his life. He could no more stop himself from flying than he could stop himself from breathing.”

Glenn hit a cliff at age 43, unable to get on another NASA mission. So, he changed gears and set his sights on becoming a U.S. senator. It took him more than a decade to get there, but when he finally did, he served for nearly 25 years. He discovered new encodings through this and learned, for example, that he was good at committee work and in legislative groups. His only major disappointment was “when he threw himself out of frame” and decided to run for U.S. president. He still had his Senate seat and continued to serve for another 15 years, and he eventually returned to space at age 77.

Cooper was not just a pilot but an explorer by nature. He was interested in the technological world beyond aviation and had a degree in aeronautical engineering. After leaving the Air Force and NASA, he took on a number of roles across industries and companies, exploring R&D, alternative energies, fuel cells, electric vehicles, and more. Some of these ventures were successful, but others less so; he tended to trust too easily and ended up falling prey to some opportunists. Despite this, he was always positive, believing the best years remained ahead.

We are born with our encodings, but not all of them are visible or obvious from birth. Depending on our circumstances, we may become aware of different encodings over time. Everyone benefits from being “in frame,” but equally, no one is immune to the negative effects of operating against their encodings. Even the most accomplished people can struggle when they fall out of frame. Yet there’s also something valuable in discovering what we are not encoded for.

“You cannot plan or think your way into a life lived perfectly.” Discovering your encodings requires trial and error—and even missteps and disappointments. What’s important is paying attention when you’re in frame or when you begin to fall out of it. Knowing your encodings is only half the task; you also need to find the right environment in which to deploy them. In Glenn’s case, he found a second hedgehog home in the Senate. Cooper, meanwhile, may never have found a second one that suited him as well as being in the Air Force and NASA.

Both the activities you do and the environment in which you do them need to fit your encodings to be fully in frame. Figuring this out requires immense self-awareness: How do you operate in different situations? What works best for you and how can you create ways of living or working that correspond with that?

Toni Morrison is a vivid example of exactly this. She found herself a single parent to two young children at age 34 and got an editing job to support her family. She was left with unexpected free time in the evenings when her children slept and became

interested in reading a story that centered Black girls. Unable to find any, she decided to write one herself. What started as a simple diversion became a compulsion. She devoted any spare pocket of time to writing. She discovered not just a skill, but also a deep desire to keep going.

It took Morrison nearly five years to finish writing her first book and to find a publisher. But she kept at it and eventually sold more and more books until she quit her job as an editor and devoted herself to writing full time. *Beloved*, one of her most famous books, wasn't published until she was 56.

Her success may not have been immediate, but Morrison embodies what it looks like to be in full hedgehog mode. She instinctively understood how to make her life and work bring out the best of her encodings. She found an operating mode that worked for her, such as stealing any free moment—even when stopped at a red light—to write. The constraints of her life didn't hinder her; they shaped how she worked.

Barbara Tuchman also didn't commit to her writing hedgehog until later in life. Like Morrison, she started after having children, and she began researching and writing books about history. Any time she had a question about something that had happened in the past, it would turn into another project. She simply couldn't help herself. Even when she faced the success cliff of winning two Pulitzer Prizes and the National Book Award, she kept writing.

Both of these women wrote more than 40% of their major books after the age of 60. Both were intrinsically motivated to write and didn't seek approval. But they differed in their ways of working: Morrison wrote for herself and could work through chaos, stealing moments to write whenever she could; Tuchman, meanwhile, wrote with an audience in mind. In the act of writing, however, she required complete quiet and solitude.

Morrison and Tuchman displayed an instinctive awareness of their encodings and effectively translated them into operating

modes tailored specifically and uniquely to them; this created a substantial effect. Neither of them let other people's perceptions stop them from trusting themselves.

One of Tuchman's books, *The Guns of August*, ended up in the hands of U.S. President John F. Kennedy, who relied on its lessons when navigating the Cuban Missile Crisis. The book was the result of her operating in hedgehog mode; she didn't intend for it to have such a significant, historical impact. The point is: You don't have to set out to help the world. Perhaps it's enough to discover and use your encodings, and you'll inadvertently end up making a positive impact.

By focusing on your encodings and committing to a hedgehog built around those encodings, you can create a meaningful life. You don't have to focus on success, fame, or visibility—just trust and follow your encodings.

4. FLIPPING THE ARROW OF MONEY

Robert Plant was obsessed with music from a young age. This created difficulties between him and his parents, who wanted him to be an accountant. Instead of giving up on his dream, Plant left home at 17, doing what he could to make ends meet while pursuing music. His big break came at age 20, when a band needed a new vocalist. He joined the band, and together they created a new project that would become Led Zeppelin. Each of the members was an immensely talented musician, but the success of Led Zeppelin came from bringing these individual talents together to create a stronger whole.

One of Plant's best friends and bandmates, John Bonham, died suddenly at age 32. Unable to continue the band without him, they disbanded. But Plant continued to play music. A "musical adventurer," he played all over the world and had many kinds of experiences throughout his life. On occasion, he and the remaining band members reunited for one-off gigs. They even briefly considered a lucrative reunion tour, but Plant decided against it, feeling that it wouldn't be an adventure. "Quite simply, he loved singing too much to get confused by money."

Most of the people in Collins' study viewed money as a means to work as opposed to the other way around. While it can be harder to pursue something you're encoded for without financial means, the people in the study came from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds. Collins demonstrates how it's possible to be in hedgehog mode regardless of privilege with the following matched pair.

Carol Heiss loved figure skating. Her family didn't have much money, so when her mother fell terminally ill and Heiss had an opportunity to go professional and earn a lot of money, there was a temptation to accept it. But doing so would have prevented her from competing in the Olympics and ended her dream of winning a gold medal. So, her mother made sure she didn't take the offer,

and the family did what they could to continue to support her goal. Her coach even went without pay for several years. Heiss continued to train and compete, eventually winning the Olympic gold medal. Afterward, she retired from the sport and accepted a lucrative movie contract that allowed her not just to support her family but also pay back her coach.

Heiss' "matched-pair companion," Tenley Albright, contracted polio as a young girl. Unsure if she would ever walk again, she used ice skating as a form of rehab. She excelled in the sport and eventually won the Olympic gold medal. But unlike Heiss, Albright came from an economically privileged background.

Heiss' and Albright's similar successes underscore how little, ultimately, wealth mattered for most of the people in the study. Even those who faced financial challenges simply found a way to make the economics work. Their approaches varied wildly, including going through periods of scarcity, getting support from family or friends, doing non-hedgehog work to support their hedgehog, and more.

The most important thing is doing what you can do to stay in frame. The risk, for those who don't find their way to a hedgehog, is getting into what Collins calls "the Curse of Competence Doom Loop," whereby a person ends up in a self-reinforcing cycle of doing something that they're good at but not encoded for. Once in this trap, you may find yourself stuck in it for years. But that doesn't mean you can't get out—many people can and do find hedgehogs later in life.

Financial constraints, while real, don't have to be limiting. Whether early or later in life, the people in the study found that once they were in hedgehog mode, no amount of money could pull them away from it. For them, the greatest reward wasn't financial; it was the ability to keep doing the work itself.

5. FOCUS THE FIRE

When Albright was competing in the Olympics, she suddenly noticed people in the audience humming along to the music. It created a feeling of deep connection for her that she would long remember. But getting to that special moment took years of practice and dedication, fueled by internal motivation that results from loving what you're doing.

Albright loved skating so much that she even loved being bad at something; it gave her the opportunity to keep practicing until she got better. She loved being creative and inventing new moves she could use in her routines. The key was truly loving what she was doing, not just being attracted to some romantic notion of what it might be like.

"Albright's genuine delight in the step-by-step process of learning or creating something new and then perfecting it, combined with the internal measuring stick of knowing she did her best, became a perpetual motivation machine." This also served her in her second hedgehog, medical surgery. This second path gave her the opportunity to continue learning new skills, and she found being a beginner again exciting. She refocused her fire from ice skating to surgery.

Collins found three big sources of fire through his research. The first is exactly what Albright embodied: doing something for the love of doing it. The second is a dynamic process that Collins calls "extend out/circle back." This involves growing and learning, while continuing to draw upon existing capabilities and encodings. The third is "choosing responsibilities," in which someone chooses to make a commitment to something, not out of a desire for praise or validation, but simply because they believe it's important.

Collins notes that Albright lived by the lesson: "Do all things not for glory, but for joy." While this is both admirable and important,

Collins concedes that we can't always do things for joy all the time. There is also what he calls a "Stress and Drudgery Tax" that often appears when you're pursuing your hedgehog.

For architect I. M. Pei, for example, some of his most celebrated projects—like the Louvre Pyramid—were also his most controversial. He faced fierce public criticism, but the work compelled him too much to stop. Every person in the study had to pay some stress and drudgery tax. The question is whether what you're doing feeds your inner fire enough to make the tax worth it. And if not, it's worth exploring whether there's a way to "lower" the tax.

Alice Paul and Lucy Burns were both leaders of the movement that helped women get the right to vote in the U.S. Both of them were deeply committed to the cause, experiencing significant hardships like jail time, hunger strikes, and force feeding. But they also had notable differences.

Paul was so laser-focused that she didn't understand having priorities outside of the cause. Even when what would become the 19th Amendment passed in the U.S. House of Representatives, she immediately went back to work, strategizing how to get it to pass in the Senate. After the amendment passed, she still remained dedicated to the cause, working on additional legislation, such as the Equal Rights Amendment.

Burns, meanwhile, integrated other priorities throughout her life. She was committed to her family as well as the church. Collins' point is that neither approach is better; there is no right and wrong. Each of them pursued their hedgehog in a way that best suited them. And this is true of many of the people in the study, plenty of whom had side passions or remained dedicated to family while in hedgehog mode.

That being said, none of them figured out how to "have it all." They had to make choices. Morrison, for example, felt that she had time to get things done because the only things she focused on were her children and her writing. Many of the people in the

study replicated this intense focus; they “sustained and focused the fire” for much of their lives. It’s not so much that they were extremely disciplined—they were intrinsically compelled because they loved what they were doing. This love meant that they simply wanted to do more of it. They couldn’t help it.

PART II: NAVIGATING CLIFFS AND FOG

6. CLIFFS

Collins' wife, Joanne, a professional athlete, competed in the Ironman World Championship in Hawaii when she was 26. During the race, an injury flared up. She managed to push through and ultimately won, but athletics were later taken from her. Various interventions couldn't treat her injury, and her career as a professional athlete ended. This profound loss, which Joanne described as feeling "like ... dying," led Collins to "the idea of studying how people move through the cliffs of life."

Joanne had to go through the experience of feeling lost in order to eventually come out the other side. But she ended up in a place she may never have expected previously, which is often what happens after a cliff. "A 'cliff' is a significant event that alters the trajectory of a life and forces choices about what's next. The big cliffs can radically change a life."

Cliffs come in all forms, and many of the people in the study faced numerous cliffs. Common to all of the cliffs is that they forced the person to really grapple with and reconsider the question of what makes a life.

Cardiss Collins lost her husband, a U.S. representative, in a plane crash. The widow's mandate practice meant that she could take her husband's seat in Congress upon his death. But she never had an interest in politics. She had built a career as a civil servant and wasn't particularly interested in leaving her job.

Maryon Pittman Allen also lost her husband, a U.S. senator, unexpectedly. She also had to decide whether to take his seat. "Each needed time to grieve in her own personal way, yet each faced pressure to decide on taking her late husband's seat in Congress."

Cardiss Collins didn't feel prepared to make a big decision in that moment, so she took just one step forward: She decided to finish

out her husband's term. As the months passed, she became more and more confident and found that she loved the work. She later ran for a second term, became deeply involved in politics, and went on to lead the Congressional Black Caucus. Before she faced a tragic cliff, "she had no inkling whatsoever that she carried within her a set of encodings that would make her an exceptionally effective member of the U.S. House of Representatives." Losing her husband was a horrible cliff to face, but it also allowed her to discover encodings that she wasn't previously aware of.

Pittman Allen also stepped into her husband's seat but found herself out of frame. She felt like she should take on the role but wasn't actually suited to it. After the term, Pittman Allen left politics and spent some time trying to get back in frame. She eventually discovered her encodings and got into restoring beauty into things, specifically old bridal gowns.

The contrast of these two women's experiences demonstrates that getting through to the other side of a cliff can look vastly different from person to person and cliff to cliff. It's not always as simple as getting back on the horse; it may be a long and difficult process. Every person in the study experienced significant cliffs in their lives, and each of us likely will, too. Whether it's a change in finances, the end of a relationship, getting laid off, losing someone, or something else, a cliff forces us to rethink and possibly even rediscover our lives. "The long arc of a life is never perfectly smooth."

7. FOG

When actor Michael J. Fox announced that he had Parkinson's disease, his public identity changed. But between his diagnosis and when he went public, there were seven years in which Fox was in the fog. "Fog is when you go through a phase of immense uncertainty and lack of clarity about the best path forward, perhaps even having no clear idea where you want to go. When in the fog, you can feel confused or disoriented or unsteady or reeling—or maybe all of these."

Fox took a number of steps to get through the fog. He began to think about life in the context of what he could and couldn't control. He decided to stop drinking. He stepped away from film and went back to TV to allow himself more time with his family. He decided he wouldn't center others' opinions of him in his life and decisions.

In the early days of his diagnosis, Fox found community with others who had Parkinson's. With time, he found himself coming out of the fog in an unexpected place: He started to take the idea of being a spokesperson for the community seriously. He raised money to fund research and created a foundation for those with the disease. The diagnosis dramatically changed Fox's life, and it simultaneously helped him discover a set of encodings he might not have found otherwise. Getting to this place of acceptance and clarity took time and was not linear, but eventually he found his next big thing.

Maurice White, the founder of the band Earth, Wind & Fire, had always led a healthy life. So when he was diagnosed with Parkinson's, he was completely blindsided. Like Fox, he chose not to go public for several years. He described this period of loss and uncertainty as "entering a wilderness of his mind." He eventually came to understand and accept that the band could continue without him, and he stepped away from it. But he didn't fully divorce himself from music; he continued working in the studio as a writer, arranger, and producer.

Both Fox and White knew what they wanted to do with their lives from a young age. Yet this clarity didn't protect them from finding themselves in the fog. Everyone can experience fog, which comes in several forms.

This includes the fog of youth, which is typically the lack of direction one might feel as a young person. Well-meaning parents often try to pull their children out of this fog, but Jim Collins found their influence is limited and can even backfire. Supportive parents helped, but those who pushed a path misaligned with their child's encodings tended to make things worse. More important than parental direction is learning to trust your own encodings.

The second type of fog is the fog of disappointment. It occurs when someone's expectations don't match their reality. White experienced this through the ups and downs of his musical career. This type of fog typically results when you let your identity or ego get too wrapped up in success; disappointment or failure can upend your sense of self.

There is also—perhaps surprisingly—a fog of success. If someone has always targeted a specific goal in life and actually achieves it, it can leave them wondering what to do next. The important thing is to continue to focus on your encodings instead of the success. “If part of the answer to the question of what to make of a life is to continually discover and deploy encodings in a direction that feeds the inner fire, then success (in whatever form and level) is simply more of a by-product that happens along the way. When we forget that, success itself can be a catalyst for fog.”

A fog can also descend in the wake of retirement. Most people in the study never planned to retire and live out the rest of their lives in leisure. Many of them navigated this fog by “retiring” from one hedgehog and transitioning into another later in life. It isn't always easy, and it isn't always voluntary, which can make things challenging.

The most important thing, regardless of what type of fog you may find yourself in, is not to make big, irreversible decisions during that period.

Early in his career, Collins found himself in a role at HP that didn't really suit his encodings. Without knowing exactly what he was doing, he created a "bug book," making notes about himself in a dispassionate, scientific way. The process helped him uncover his likes and dislikes and more, which ultimately led him to discovering his encodings. While a bug book might not be the right approach for everyone, the goal is to figure out a process that helps you learn more about yourself and allows you to navigate your own periods of fog.

Getting out of the fog isn't swift or dramatic. Typically, it involves taking iterative steps until you get to your next big thing. And this process may reveal a path that you never expected. Collins calls this unplanned approach of iterative moves "simplex stepping."

8. SIMPLEX STEPPING

The idea of simplex stepping evolved from a concept a professor named George Dantzig shared with Collins. The idea is to take the best step you can in each moment, reassess from where you stand, and then repeat the process. “Even if a step doesn’t prove particularly helpful, or even feels like a small mistake you need to reverse, you simply readjust and ask, ‘Okay, so now what looks like the best next step?’” It’s less about figuring out the “right” step or even knowing where you’re going; it’s more about going somewhere. You may not know where the other steps could have led you, but you know you’ve reached somewhere good.

When Katharine Graham lost her husband, she found herself in the dual fogs of grief and uncertainty. She wasn’t sure she was ready to take on the role of CEO of her husband’s business, The Washington Post Company, but decided to take one small step toward it anyway. Her plan was to hold things together until one of her children could take over. But as time went on, she found that she both loved the job and was good at it. The cliff, as devastating as it was, revealed a number of encodings.

Graham’s first step after being thrown into this leadership role was to practice the “First Who” principle—“first get the right people on the bus; then figure out where to drive the bus.” This included elevating Ben Bradlee to deputy managing editor of *The Washington Post*. By the time the decision came around regarding whether to print the Pentagon Papers, Graham had been simplex stepping her way through the CEO role for several years. She had gotten out of the fog and approached the decision with clarity. It not only helped the newspaper gain national recognition—it was also the moment she fully stepped into herself as a leader.

Graham showed a skill for leadership, yet she knew there were still opportunities to learn and continued pursuing those. For example, she developed a relationship with Warren Buffett and

made him her mentor. From his informal lessons, she built up her managerial and financial capabilities, which helped her become an even more adept CEO. “She simply followed her encoded operating mode of getting the right people around her, learning from them, and then deploying that learning to great effect.”

As Graham faced the possibility of retirement, she decided to begin work on her memoir. She started with small steps once again, and this work eventually culminated in her winning the Pulitzer for the book.

Graham never could have known the shape her life would take following her husband’s death, but she just took one small step at a time out of the fog. “You so often get where you are going by stumbling, but you can only stumble if you’re moving.” A cliff may be earth shattering and abrupt, but the clarity that emerges after is slow and quiet. You may not realize that you’ve moved through the fog until you get out the other side.

Georgia Frontiere also lost her husband unexpectedly and found herself in the position of taking over his role as the owner of the Los Angeles Rams NFL franchise. She fell completely in love with the job. She wasn’t just determined to succeed in the role—she wanted the team to win, too. Unlike Graham, Frontiere was prepared, as her husband had been teaching her about the business for years. She wasn’t ready for the way or timing of his death, but she was set up for success. In this way, she was able to “preclear” some of the fog.

Alan Page also embodied this, as he started to take small steps toward his next act before retiring from the NFL. He had what Collins calls a “‘point reallocation’ strategy,” where he slowly started to shift his focus from giving 100% to one thing (football) to slowly giving some of that attention to the next thing (law) until the emphasis shifted entirely. Preclearing the fog helps—but it doesn’t mean the path won’t still be difficult. Frontiere had to adjust to a new career while mourning the death of her husband, but the preparation meant she was able to emerge from the fog faster and more confidently.

Both Graham and Frontiere were underestimated as young women. Neither of them found themselves fully in frame as business leaders until they were in their 50s. Their lives stand as a lesson that a lot of a person can remain out of sight, and when they get into frame, everyone around them can benefit as well.

Collins has personally experienced the multiplicative benefits of people getting into frame. As a manager, he found he instinctively tried to push people to be the person he wanted them to be. But he came to see that this didn't work. He shifted to doing what he could to help the members of his team find their encodings, which didn't just benefit each person; it helped the whole team do better, too.

9. THE ROULETTE WHEEL OF LIFE

Led Zeppelin guitarist Jimmy Page had a series of lucky moments as a young person, starting with finding a guitar left behind at the house his family moved into. He and many others in the study experienced a type of luck that Collins describes as “spins of the roulette wheel [that] played a role in finding a path that so perfectly fit his encodings.”

Across the study, Collins found that the roulette wheel spun at different moments for different people—and often more than once. Of the people studied, 68% found their first hedgehog before age 30, and 32% found theirs in their 30s or 40s. For those with second hedgehogs, 47% found their second hedgehog in their 50s or 60s. Most of those who found a second or third hedgehog landed on something dramatically different from their first, suggesting that a person can find new encodings at any point in life. “[I]f we embrace the view that each of us has many possibilities to potentially discover ... then the challenge changes dramatically from the low odds of finding that one elusive unicorn hedgehog to finding just one of many possibilities.”

There are numerous possibilities on the roulette wheel, and while there’s no guarantee that the ball will drop in a place that’s aligned with our encodings, there’s also the possibility that we might spin the wheel numerous times. That means we have multiple possible paths within us—and multiple opportunities to find them. The fact that people in the study found more than one hedgehog is proof that nobody is limited to just one.

Like a game of roulette, part of this is about luck. Just as important, though, is what Collins calls “return on luck”—what we choose to do with the luck we get.

U.S. President Gerald Ford had several lucky moments early in life. His mother left his father and found a great man who became his beloved stepfather. Lacking the means to pay for college,

Ford got a scholarship that allowed him to attend. He similarly didn't have enough money for Yale Law School but had the opportunity to work as the assistant coach of the college's football team, allowing him to pay the tuition. Luck carried Ford through his career, too, saving him from a near-death experience in the military and helping him get elected to Congress and later be named President Richard Nixon's vice president following Spiro Agnew's resignation.

Luck and preparation created the conditions for Ford's successes. "'I never planned on moving from one spot to another, but I always felt that what I was doing would prepare me for the next opportunity,' Ford said. 'You have to have the confidence that you're available and competent if lightning strikes, and if that's plodding, it seems to have worked.'"

When Ford became president, he experienced numerous lucky misses, including more than one assassination attempt. Collins notes, however, that becoming president actually knocked Ford out of frame. The presidency—the highest office in the land—pulled Ford away from the legislative work he was encoded for, a reminder that prestige and alignment are not the same thing.

President Jimmy Carter's early years mirrored Ford's in many ways—down to serving in the military and having a near-death experience. Carter had other bits of luck, including finding a mentor in the Navy and not contracting the pancreatic cancer that had claimed the lives of several family members. Over time, he became interested in politics, and with the luck of a Supreme Court ruling, he was able to win a seat as a state senator in Georgia.

With the encoding of an outsider, Carter also had the luck of timing. Hunter S. Thompson happened to hear one of Carter's early speeches and became a huge fan of his. Carter's outsider status matched the antiestablishment sentiments of the time, and Thompson helped him become a nationally recognized name. But Carter's luck changed when he entered the White House. He had numerous challenges as president, including repeated bad luck around the Iran hostage crisis.

While luck played a significant role in both Ford's and Carter's lives, it wasn't just luck alone. Some things are out of our control, but we can control how we respond to luck. "Return on luck is what you make of your luck (good or bad) when it comes. The question is not whether you will get luck, both good luck and bad, but what you do with the luck you get." Someone doesn't need to be luckier or get lucky more often; they simply need to make the most of the luck they get.

Collins breaks down luck into three types: "what luck," which involves an event or sequence of events; "who luck," which involves crossing paths with a person who significantly affects your life; and "zeit-luck," when the zeitgeist of the times plays a big role in your life.

Regardless of the type of luck, one of the best ways to increase your return on luck is to seize what Collins describes as "NATILIE" ("Not All Time In Life Is Equal") moments. "NATILIE moments are episodes of outsized opportunity or peril that call for summoning a level of energy and focus far beyond the person's normal set point."

Fox, for example, was served up a NATILIE moment when he was offered the lead role in the film *Back to the Future*. He was still committed to the TV series *Family Ties* but didn't want to turn down the opportunity, so he shot both at the same time. Getting the career-making role was luck, but what he decided to do with it when the moment came was his return on luck. Every one of us will face moments like this in our lives. It's up to us to decide how we meet them.

Just as everyone in the study experienced good luck at times, they also had bad luck or faced adversity. Collins notes that a person could face a set of circumstances so adverse that it becomes difficult, if not impossible, for them to find a hedgehog. So, although those in the study faced some adversity or bad luck, "they all benefited from having circumstances *solid enough* to come fully into frame at least once, to get past the cliffs, and to feed the inner fire."

Both Carter and Ford faced challenges after leaving office. The former wasn't just in the fog of losing reelection; he also had significant financial difficulties. But he simply stepped his way out, finding projects to work on until he got out of the fog. After developing the idea for the Carter Center, he found a new way to deploy his encodings and served out the rest of his life as an "independent statesman and sage."

Jonathan Alter, author of Carter's biography *His Very Best*, called Carter a "freelance secretary of state," a role that suited him and his encodings. Being an outsider served him well in this role, allowing him to have a meaningful post-presidential life that may have brought him more fully into frame than the presidency ever did. Ford similarly worked as an "independent statesman and sage," including becoming close friends and collaborating with Carter. In many ways, both men found themselves most in frame in the years after leaving the White House.

PART III: FEEDING THE INNER FIRE LONG AND LATE

10. EXTEND OUT/CIRCLE BACK

When Meryl Streep turned 40, she feared she wouldn't get any more work as an actor. Instead, she ended up earning more Oscar nominations after age 40 than any other actor in history had achieved across their whole careers.

Streep found and committed to her acting hedgehog in her 20s. She became renowned for her skills as a dramatic actor and received her first Oscar nomination at 29. When she reached the "turning-40-in-Hollywood cliff," she unexpectedly made a shift from drama to comedy. She went on to take a step toward action movies as well. But this departure from drama wasn't permanent. She extended out to new types of roles but then continued to circle back to the dramatic work she had first become known for. Streep continued to do some of her best work as she got older, earning six Oscar nominations in her 60s. She continued to expand her range, and with it, her inner fire grew.

This approach that Streep embodied is what Collins calls "Extend Out/Circle Back"—"a looping process of, on the one hand, pushing out the edges and doing new things, and on the other hand, returning to the wellspring of encodings tapped before." Through the growth and development of extending out, you feed your fire. It allows you to see previously unseen encodings. Circling back in this context can also be reinvigorating. You're no longer confined to doing what you've always done, but free to grow and build on it.

Streep's encoding of unending curiosity meant that she was always interested in pursuing different projects and roles. But circling back was equally important, and the two aspects reinforced each other.

Debra Winger, the other half of Streep's matched pair, had a near-death experience that became a NATILIE moment for her. After that, she threw herself into acting. She loved the work and

put everything into each role, learning more about herself each time. Winger gave so much to acting that after each role she needed time to rest and recover the energy to throw herself back into the work. At the same time, she never wanted the fame associated with being an actor. This proved to be a stress and drudgery tax for Winger, but she knew it was part of the deal.

As opportunities changed for her as she hit 40, Winger decided to take a step back from acting. She nursed her mother, focused on parenting, and got involved in other interests. She switched to a more private life. "I just was following my life, and it wasn't there in Hollywood," she was quoted as saying. The transition was hard, but she eventually found her groove, and then later circled back to doing a bit of acting again. Unlike Streep's very public, obvious extending out, Winger's was much more private.

For many of the people in the study, early interests were helpful when it came time to extend out. While many people's first hedgehog was the result of seeds that they uncovered early on, this was not the case for everyone. Some had planted seeds that remained dormant for years before flowering.

Particularly in moments of fog, these seeds can be instrumental in helping you figure out what's next. For many in the study, another key part of continuing to feed the fire later in life was giving themselves permission to have fun while doing what they were encoded for. In this way, the fire may not just remain, but actually grow.

11. CHOOSING RESPONSIBILITIES

Charles Colson went to prison for obstruction of justice in his role working for President Richard Nixon. Early in life, he discovered an encoding for being “a political ‘hatchet man’”—he was willing to do whatever it took. But just before going to prison, Colson experienced a religious conversion. He spent his time in prison thinking about how he could spend the rest of his life guided by faith.

After being released, Colson found himself in the fog. He wasn’t sure what to do with the rest of his life and began simplex stepping, working on a manuscript among other activities. None of it fueled the fire. Then he had an idea to bring faith to prisoners, and he started a small prison ministry program. He was so energized by the work that he used his book royalties to create a nonprofit called Prison Fellowship. This dedication later extended to broader prison reform work.

Colson was living what Collins calls freely chosen responsibilities, an idea built on the Toni Morrison quote: “[T]he point is that freedom is choosing your responsibility. It’s not having no responsibilities; it’s choosing the ones you want.” Instead of letting scandal and prison ruin him, Colson shifted and found that some of his best years lay ahead. He chose responsibilities, held himself accountable, and rid himself of the desire for recognition and power.

One part of choosing responsibility is to live according to a standard that you choose. Everyone in the study had their own set of core values. Although there was no universal set of values across those in the study, each of them made a choice to live according to their individual values. They did so not for validation or out of penance. These values weren’t performed for others, nor did they require public visibility to be real. By choosing responsibilities, people like Colson could look forward instead of getting stuck looking backward, considering how life might have gone differently.

This act of looking forward is what Collins calls the “Mothershead Mantra.” When Collins was a student, a professor named John L. Mothershead Jr. said, “There are two ways to go through life. The first is to ride through life sitting in the saddle looking backward. The other is to ride through life sitting in the saddle pointed forward.”

Colson’s matched-pair companion John Ehrlichman also worked in the Nixon administration, was disgraced, and served time in prison. Ehrlichman felt abandoned and betrayed by Nixon after serving him so loyally. In spite of this, he realized he needed to step forward. Even before beginning his prison sentence, he moved to Santa Fe, New Mexico, started to write, and published his first novel. Ehrlichman was a skilled writer and went on to write several novels, a memoir, and numerous articles. But nearly all of them touched directly or indirectly on his experience in Washington, D.C. He got stuck looking backwards.

“For Charles Colson, Watergate would always be there, but growing ever smaller as he rode pointed forward in the saddle. The evidence suggests that Ehrlichman cared a great deal about restoring his reputational legacy.”

Everyone in the study chose responsibilities beyond themselves—for someone or something else. This isn’t to say that there was nothing selfish at all in their choices, but they always pointed outward. By choosing responsibilities that align with our encodings and that we feel genuinely drawn to, we will feed our inner fire. In fact, Collins found that this was more prevalent and necessary than legacy. Few of the people in the study thought or wrote about the idea of legacy. Instead, they focused on making an impact by honoring the responsibilities they chose. As Collins puts it: “What responsibilities will you choose right here, right now, with the limited time you have left on this earth?”

12. FEEDING THE INNER FIRE (AND DOING GREAT WORK LATE)

“One of the biggest lessons of this entire work is that our younger selves need not tower over our older selves.” Many of the people in the study had some of their greatest achievements after age 50 or 60.

Roger Sherman, for example, may be relatively unknown compared to some of the other people featured in the study, but he played a significant role in the founding of the United States. This may be because his encodings were mostly for behind-the-scenes committee and legal work. He was quiet but knew the right moment to speak. His contributions, however, are significant: He played a crucial role in developing the idea for a bicameral legislative body and was involved in the creation of the Bill of Rights. It is thanks to him that the latter is a document separate from the fixed text of the Constitution, creating a legal system that is both stable and adaptable, due to the ability to amend the document. After attaining professional success as an entrepreneur, Sherman spent the last third of his life in hedgehog mode working on this literally historical project, focused more on impact than on fame or credit.

Benjamin Franklin also experienced much professional success in the first two-thirds of his life, but he was more interested in following his curiosity than in accumulating wealth. His encoding drew him into observing, questioning, and inventing. While he could have easily “settled into a glide path of descent” after professional and scientific success, Franklin became fully invested in the founding of the U.S. Even when his physical health began to fail, his mind was sharp. He became the U.S. ambassador to France in his 70s, securing an alliance against the British. At 79, he became what we would today call the governor of Pennsylvania.

Both Sherman’s and Franklin’s capabilities increased with age. This is consistent across the people in the study, many of whom made their biggest contributions later in life. Collins attributes

this to three compounding sub-capabilities. First, encodings don't diminish with age, and in fact, new ones continue to emerge. Second, cumulative experience means that most people simply get better at their craft over time. Third, credibility—built across decades—becomes an exponential multiplier, opening doors and commanding trust that younger versions of the same person may not have been able to access.

Not only does a person's total capability increase with time, but also they tend to get better at leading. Collins has come to believe that the best leadership results from someone leading from their encodings. This means there's no recipe to follow to become a great leader; you must lean into the traits that are natural for you. "Leadership is the art of getting people to want to do what must be done." When someone has the freedom to say no but wants to do something anyway, that's a sign of good leadership. And each of us has our own way of getting them there. Sherman and Franklin are instructive here: Neither held raw executive power, yet both shaped the founding of a nation by leading entirely from their encodings. Thus, to become a better leader, you need only trust your own encodings.

Cliffs and fog came for all of the people in the study, but their lives remained, for the most part, on an upward arc. As Collins observes, they continued to accelerate after 50, long after the world might have expected them to slow down.

13. QUESTIONS ARE BETTER THAN ANSWERS

Several experiences planted the seeds for what resulted in this book: Collins' dad's departure when he was young, his wife's injury, and a few conversations he had with John W. Gardner, a colleague at Stanford University and author of the book *Self-Renewal*. During one conversation, Collins asked him when you know it's time to make a life change. Gardner replied, "As soon as you start asking the question." Gardner also encouraged Collins to consider studying the question of self-renewal; this prompting also helped Collins write this book.

What the research resists, Collins argues, is the idea of a 10-step program or a set of instructions to follow. The people in the study shouldn't be treated as templates; their specific paths reflected their specific encodings, which differ from yours. What's more useful than answers, he concludes, are questions—not because they're easier, but because they plant seeds of discovery that instructions cannot.

Among the many questions Collins poses are:

"Suppose you were to complete the following sentence by replacing X with a single word: 'What I most want is a(n) X life.' What, for you, is X?"

- / "What activities ignite the inner fire so strongly, and what activities do you so love doing, that you're willing to pay a hefty Stress and Drudgery Tax to do them?"
- / "If you're in the fog, what might be your next simplex steps, even if you don't know where you are going?"
- / "What seeds from earlier in life have lain dormant—interests you've always had, but for whatever reason your life went a different direction? How can you water those seeds as a method of Extend Out/Circle Back?"

These questions, Collins believes, enable you to make discoveries that no amount of advice from others can replicate—and that, combined with honest conversations with the people who know you best, is a powerful way to gain clarity.

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