

The secrets of successful late bloomers

Our society is relentlessly focused on early success, but many of history's most celebrated individuals found their paths only after years of wandering, writes David Brooks

Paul Cézanne always knew he wanted to be an artist. His father compelled him to enter law school, but after two desultory years he withdrew. In 1861, at the age of 22, he went to Paris to pursue his artistic dreams but was rejected by the École des Beaux-Arts, struggled as a painter, and retreated back to his hometown in the south of France, where he worked as a clerk in his father's bank.

He returned to Paris the next year and was turned down again by the École. His paintings were rejected by the Salon de Paris every year from 1864 to 1869. He continued to submit paintings until 1882, but none were accepted. He joined with the impressionists, many of whose works were also being rejected, but soon stopped showing with them as well.

By middle age, he was discouraged. He wrote to a friend, "On this matter I must tell you that the numerous studies to which I devoted myself having produced only negative results, and dreading criticism that is only too justified, I have resolved to work in silence, until the day when I should feel capable of defending theoretically the results of my endeavours." For ten years from the mid-1880s, none of Cézanne's paintings were put on public display. In 1886, when Cézanne was 47, the celebrated writer Émile Zola, the artist's closest friend since adolescence, published a novel called *The Oeuvre*. It was about two young men, one who grows up to be a famous author and the other who grows up to be a failed painter and dies by suicide. The painter character was based, at least in part, on Cézanne. Upon publication of the novel, Zola sent a copy to Cézanne, who responded with a short, polite reply. After that, they rarely communicated.

Things began to turn around in 1895, when, at the age of 56, Cézanne had his first one-man show. Two years later, one of his paintings was purchased by a museum in Berlin, the first time any museum had shown that kind of interest in his work. By the time he was 60, his paintings had started selling, though for much lower prices than those fetched by Manet or Renoir. Soon he was famous, revered. Fellow artists made pilgrimages to watch him work. What drove the man through all those decades of setbacks and obscurity? One biographer attributed it to his "inquiétude" – his drive, restlessness, anxiety. He just kept pushing himself to get better. His continual sense of dissatisfaction was evident in a letter he wrote to his son in 1906, at age 67, a month before he died: "I want to tell you that as a painter I am becoming more



Paul Cézanne had his first one-man show in 1895, at the age of 56

clairvoyant to nature, but that it is always very difficult for me to realise my feelings. I cannot reach the intensity that unfolds before my senses. I do not possess that wonderful richness of colour that animates nature." He was still at it on the day he died, still working on his paintings, still teaching himself to improve.

The year after his death, a retrospective of his work was mounted in Paris. Before long, he would be widely recognised as one of the founders of modern art: "Cézanne is the father of us all," both Matisse and Picasso are said to have declared.

Today, we live in a society structured to promote early bloomers. Our school system has sorted people by the time they are 18. Some of these people zoom to prestigious

academic launching pads while others get left behind. Many of our most prominent models of success made it big while young – Bill Gates, Mark Zuckerberg, Elon Musk, Taylor Swift, Michael Jordan. Magazines publish lists with headlines like "30 Under 30" to glamorise youthful superstars on the rise. Age discrimination is a fact of life. "Young people are just smarter," Zuckerberg once said, in possibly the dumbest statement in American history. "There are no second acts in American lives," F. Scott Fitzgerald once observed, in what might be the next dumbest.

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But for many people, the talents that bloom later in life are more consequential than the ones that bloom early. A 2019 study by researchers in Denmark found that, on average, Nobel Prize

winners made their crucial discoveries at the age of 44. Even brilliant people apparently need at least a couple of decades to master their field. A 45-year-old is twice as likely to produce a scientific breakthrough as a 25-year-old. A study published in *The American Economic Review* found 45 to be the average age of an entrepreneur – and found furthermore that the likelihood that an entrepreneur's startup will succeed increases significantly between ages 25 and 35, with the odds of success continuing to rise well into the 50s. A tech founder who is 50 is twice as likely to start a successful company as one who is 30.

Successful late bloomers are all around us. Morgan Freeman had his breakthrough roles in *Street Smart* and *Driving Miss Daisy* in his early 50s. Isak Dinesen published the book that established her literary reputation, *Out of Africa*, at 52. Copernicus came up with his theory of planetary motion in his 60s. Noah was around 600 when he built his ark (though Noah truthers dispute his birth certificate). Why do some people hit their peak later than others?

In his book *Late Bloomers*, the journalist Rich Karlgaard points out that this is really two questions: First, why didn't these people bloom earlier? Second, what traits or skills did they possess that enabled them to bloom late? It turns out that late bloomers are not simply early bloomers on a delayed timetable. They tend to be qualitatively different, possessing a different set of abilities that are mostly invisible to or discouraged by our current education system.

If you survey history, a taxonomy of achievement emerges. In the first category are the early bloomers, precocious geniuses such as Picasso or Fitzgerald. Then there are the "second-mountain people", exemplified by, say, Albert Schweitzer. First, they conquer their career mountain; Schweitzer was an accomplished musician and scholar. But these people find career success unsatisfying, so they leave their career mountain. Schweitzer became a doctor in the poorest parts of Africa, and won the Nobel Peace Prize in 1952.

Finally, there are those that the economist David Galenson calls "the masters". People such as Cézanne or Alfred Hitchcock or Charles Darwin, who regard their entire lives as experiments. Their focus is not on their finished work, which they often toss away haphazardly. It is on the process of learning itself: Am I closer to understanding, to mastering? They live their lives as a long period of trial and error, trying this and trying that, a slow process of accumulation and elaboration, so the quality of their work peaks late in life.

Let's look at some of the traits that tend to distinguish late bloomers from early bloomers.

Intrinsic motivation

Most schools and workplaces are built around extrinsic motivation: if you work hard, you will be rewarded with good grades, better salaries and bonuses. Extrinsic-motivation systems are built on the assumption that, though work is unpleasant, if you give people external incentives to perform, they will respond productively. People who submit to extrinsic-reward systems are encouraged to develop a merit-badge mentality. They get good at complying with other people's standards, pursuing other people's goals. People driven by intrinsic motivation are not like that. They are bad at paying attention to what other people tell them to pay attention to. Winston Churchill was a poor student for this reason. "Where my reason, imagination, or interest were not engaged, I would not or I could not learn," he wrote in *My Early Life*.

Diversive curiosity Our culture pushes people to specialise early: Be like Tiger Woods, driving golf balls as a toddler. Concentrate on one thing and get really good, really fast. Yet most professional athletes are less like Tiger Woods and more like Roger Federer, who played a lot of different sports when he was young. Many late bloomers endure a brutal wandering period, as they cast about for a vocation. Julia Child made hats, worked for US intelligence (where she was part of a team trying to develop an effective shark repellent), and thought about trying to become a novelist before enrolling in a French cooking school at 37.

During these early periods, late bloomers try and then quit so many jobs that the people around them might conclude that they lack resilience. But these are exactly the years when they are developing "diversive curiosity" – the ability to wander into a broad range of interests. The benefits might be hard to see in the short term, but they become obvious once the late bloomer begins to take advantage of their breadth of knowledge by putting discordant ideas together in new ways. The diaries of Charles



Julia Child didn't learn to cook until she was 37

Darwin show that in the decades before he published *On the Origin of Species*, he corresponded with at least 231 scientists, whose worked ranged across 13 streams, from economics to geology, the biology of barnacles to the sex life of birds. Darwin couldn't have written his great works if he hadn't been able to combine these vastly different intellectual currents.

Early screw-ups Late bloomers often don't fit into existing systems. They are bad at being "excellent sheep" – bad at following the conventional rules of success. Buckminster Fuller was expelled from college twice, lost his job in the building business when he was 32, and later contemplated suicide. But then he moved to Greenwich Village, took a

teaching job and eventually emerged as an architect, designer and futurist. Colonel Sanders was fired for insubordination when he was a railway engineer, and then fired for brawling while working as a fireman. His career as a lawyer ended when he got into a fist fight with a client. Then, at 62, he created the recipe for what became Kentucky Fried Chicken, began to succeed as a franchiser at 69, and sold the company for \$2m when he was 73.

The ability to self-teach Late bloomers don't find their calling until they are too old for traditional education systems. So, they have to teach themselves. Successful autodidacts start with what psychologists call a "high need for cognition" – they like to think a lot. Leonardo da Vinci is the poster child for high-cognition needs. Consider his lists of research projects: "Ask the master of arithmetic how to square a triangle... examine a crossbow... ask about the measurement of the Sun... draw Milan."

Wisdom After a lifetime of experimentation, some late

bloomers transcend their craft to achieve a kind of comprehensive wisdom. Wisdom is a complex trait. It starts with pattern recognition – using experience to understand what is really going on. But wisdom is more than just pattern recognition; it's the ability to see things from multiple points of view, the ability to aggregate perspectives and rest in the tensions between them.

When he was in his 60s, Cézanne built a study in Provence and painted a series of scenes of a single mountain, Mont Sainte-Victoire, which are now often considered his greatest works. He wasn't so much painting the mountain as painting time. He was also painting perception itself, its continual flow, its uncertainties and evolutions. "I progress very slowly", he wrote to the painter Émile Bernard, "for nature reveals herself to me in complex ways; and the progress needed is endless."

When I was young, I was mentored by William F. Buckley and Milton Friedman, both at that time approaching the end of their careers. Both men had changed history. Buckley created the modern conservative movement that led to the election of Ronald Reagan. Friedman changed economics and won the Nobel Prize. I had a chance to ask each of them, separately, if they ever felt completion, if they ever had a sense that they'd done their work and now they had crossed the finish line and could relax. Neither man even understood my question. They were never at rest, pushing for what they saw as a better society all the days of their lives. I've noticed this pattern again and again: slow at the start, late bloomers are still sprinting during that final lap – they do not slow down as age brings its decay. They are seeking. They are striving. They are in it with all their heart.

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