



How to make *a fresh start*

BY NANCY K. SCHLOSSBERG

Correspondent

How many times have you heard the phrase “I’m going to reinvent myself?” I’m going to reinvent myself when I go off to college, when I hit my mid-life crisis, when I finally get to retire. The phrase is ubiquitous in our culture, but what does it really mean? And is it even possible?

“Reinvention” was the buzzword at a Florida Boomer Lifestyle Conference in 2010. Jane Pauley makes the case for reinvention in her book, “Your Life Calling: Reimagining the Rest of Your Life,” as does Arianna Huffington in her new

book, “Thriving.” Marlo Thomas’ book “It Ain’t Over...Till It’s Over” shares stories of women who have changed their lives. And Marc Freedman single-handedly started a social movement called Encore Careers, appealing to retiring baby boomers who want to start over.

So you would think that writing a column on the subject of reinvention should be a slam dunk. There is so much material and interest in the topic. However, the word “reinvention” is used so broadly that its meaning is often obscured.

Let’s start with a definition. According to the dictionary, reinvention means “to make major changes or improvements to (something)” or “to present (something)

in a different or new way.” Revitalization, a related concept, means “to imbue (something) with new life and vitality.”

I applaud the books and programs that encourage people to make improvements in their looks, hairstyle, fitness, career, finances and relationships. In fact, one of my first research endeavors was a study of adult men returning to undergraduate school at Wayne State University after the age of 35. This study, conducted in the late ’60s, consisted of interviews with mostly blue-collar men who were programmed to take care of their mortgages and wives. Returning to school was a major change for them, one that did not seem “manly” at the time. One janitor went back to school



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to become a teacher, a real estate salesman returned to become a banker. They were definitely making major lifestyle changes. They were reinventing themselves.

But as I interviewed the men in depth, I began to see that change has several components. These men were not changing their basic personalities.

There is an illustrative story about Harvard psychologist David McClelland who studied people's needs. When asked whether he thought one of his advisees, Richard Albert, who changed his name to Ram Dass and became a spiritual teacher and the author of the book "Be Here Now," had changed, McClelland answered: "He looks totally different, dresses in robes instead of suits, has a new name, so, yes, he has changed. But, no, he still has the same need for power and control."

I think that story, which may be apocryphal, explains the dilemma about using the word "reinvention" to apply to everything about a person. Changing how we look at life, how we react to others and how we deal with trauma does not happen easily or often. George Vaillant, who chaired the Grant study — one of the most comprehensive longitudinal research programs of men from 17 to 70 — found that for the most part, people's unconscious coping strategies, what he refers to as defense mechanisms, remain constant. Basic changes can occur

but usually as a result of psychotherapy or as Dan Levinson, author of "Seasons of a Man's Life," points out, the lucky choice of a partner who supports your dream.

So I am left perplexed? Can adults reinvent themselves? I suggest thinking about change along a continuum from revitalizing what you already have by going to Plan B to a total remake, which includes reinventing your approach, your coping strategies, your defense mechanisms. Writers like Jane Pauley and Marlo Thomas are talking about revitalizing. Scholars like George Vaillant and others are studying underlying characteristics or defense mechanisms that are much more difficult to change.

My conclusion:

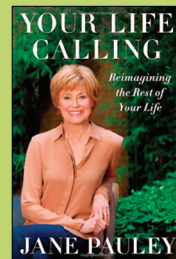
Don't worry about reinvention. Think about what you have and what you can do to enhance your well-being.

Sarasota resident and former professor of counseling at the University of Maryland, College Park, Nancy K. Schlossberg is board chair of Institute for the Ages. She writes self-help books, blogs, lectures and runs workshops on coping with change. You can contact her through www.transitionthroughlife.com or at nancyks4@gmail.com.



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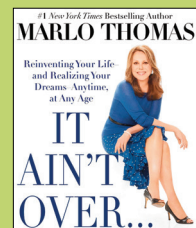
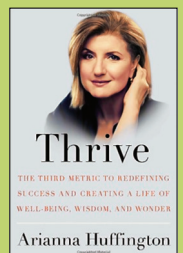
on topic



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