

## IDEAS

# All hail the late bloomers

Our society revels in early success. But research into aging and achievement shows that middle age is when creativity really sparks.

By **Claudia Kalb** Updated November 18, 2021, 11:00 a.m.



OMAR VEGA/GLOBE STAFF/FILE/ADOBE

**W**hen she was in her early 20s, Julia Child found herself stewing in ambiguity. Four years at Smith College, where she earned her degree in 1934, had given Child a privileged education. But she had no idea what to do next. “I knew I didn’t want to become a standard housewife, or a corporate woman,” she wrote in her memoir, “*My Life in France*,” “but I wasn’t sure what I *did* want to be.”



Julia Child, a late bloomer whose career really got cooking at midlife. The late, longtime Cambridge resident is the subject of the forthcoming documentary "Julia." PAUL CHILD/SCHLESINGER LIBRARY, RADCLIFFE INSTITUTE, HARVARD UNIVERSITY/SONY PICTURES CLASSICS VIA AP

It's hard to imagine Julia Child as anything other than the celebrity cookbook author and TV icon she later became — the 6-foot-3 woman whose influence inspired home cooks across America to replace TV dinners and Jell-O molds with boeuf bourguignon and cherry clafoutis.

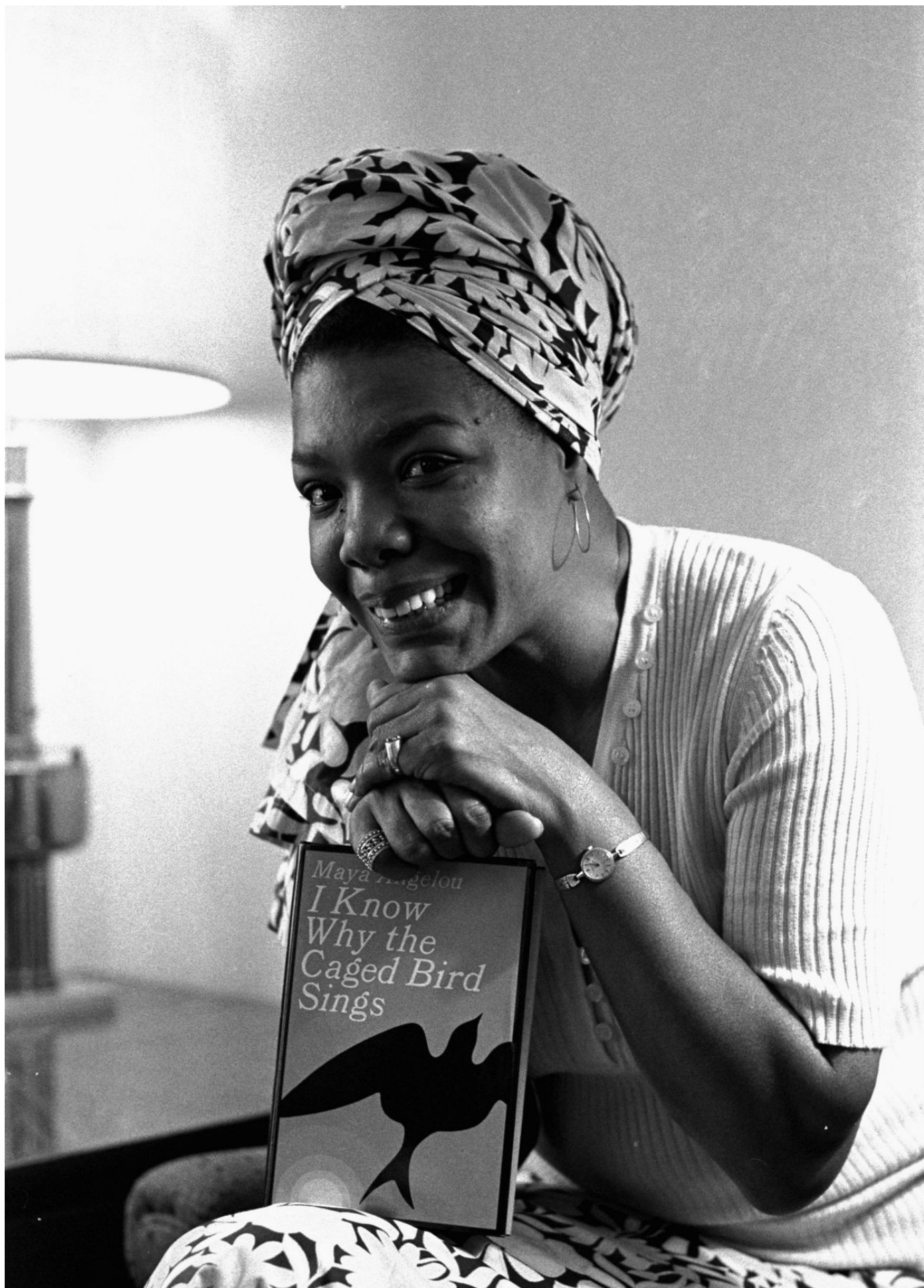
But Child's evolution took time. Despite a capacious appetite that surfaced in childhood, Child remained a culinary neophyte into adulthood. She first tasted sole meunière and briny oysters at the age of 36, enrolled in Le Cordon Bleu in her late 30s, co-wrote "Mastering the Art of French Cooking" in her 40s, and debuted on public television in Boston as "The French Chef" at 50.

## The surprising timetable of genius

We live in a society that revels in early success. Child prodigies, who master a professional skill by adolescence, astonish us. Twenty-somethings are hailed for breakthrough novels and billion-dollar start-ups. Fortune recently released its “40 Under 40” list. Entrepreneur introduced us to 15 millionaires under the age of 27. Next month, Forbes weighs in with its annual catalog of “30 Under 30” trailblazers.

The middle and later decades, by contrast, are often dreaded, if not maligned. The midlife crisis! The memory blunders! The looming specter of death and dying!

These judgments are both outdated and deleterious to a wide swath of the population. They’re also unfounded. In the course of researching Child and other high achievers for a book about the timetable of genius, I discovered a welcome truth: Midlife may be the gateway to the most satisfying, productive, and even successful decades of our lives.





Maya Angelou poses with a copy of her book "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings" in Los Angeles in 1971. ASSOCIATED PRESS/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Maya Angelou wrote her first memoir, “I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings,” at 40. Alexander Fleming discovered penicillin at 47. In his 50s, Isaac Newton became master of the Royal Mint, rooting out counterfeiters and helping to ward off a financial crisis. Eleanor Roosevelt spearheaded the passage of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights at 64. Retired scientist Peter Mark Roget was in his 70s when he compiled his best-selling compendium of words, “Thesaurus of English Words and Phrases.” Nurse-turned-adventurer Barbara Hillary was in her 70s when she became the first Black woman on record to reach the North and South Poles.

## **Finding your hot streak**

Midlifers and late bloomers have bragging rights on lived experience. We’ve likely worked more jobs, met more people, paid more bills, and survived more upsets. We’ve certainly had more time to ponder the existential question “What do I want to be?”

New science reveals how important these perambulations are: They help us fine-tune our interests and stoke our expertise. Northwestern University economist Dashun Wang is elucidating this through his study of “hot streaks” — periods of exceptional professional accomplishment. In 2018, Wang and his colleagues discovered that such phases occur across artistic, cultural, and scientific disciplines.



Barbara Hillary with the parka she wore when she became the first Black woman to officially make it to the North and South Poles. RICHARD DREW/ASSOCIATED PRESS

But what propels these breakthrough periods? Wang had a spark of his own during a visit to the Van Gogh Museum in Amsterdam, when he noticed that van Gogh painted his vibrant, bold, and most notable works — including “The Starry Night” and “Bedroom in Arles” — after an experimental period of more somber, realistic renderings. Inspired by the artist’s transformation, Wang set out to better understand patterns of achievement and when and how hot streaks occur.

In an analysis of more than 20,000 artists, film directors, and scientists, Wang’s team created algorithms to examine factors such as auction prices, IMDb (Internet Movie Database) ratings, and academic paper citations (how often an article is referenced by other investigators) to pinpoint the trajectory of performance. In their study, [published in September](#), the researchers found that hot streaks typically involve a sequence of exploration followed by exploitation. Neither phase works in isolation.

This means we need time to investigate, deliberate — maybe even meander — before we flourish. Exploration can feel disconcerting. *What am I doing? What will this lead to?* Wang says we need to reframe our thinking. “If you’re in a period where you’re not really going anywhere, maybe that’s the period where you’re generating a lot of new possibilities, trying out new things,” he says. “What if that period is necessary for your later success?”

Wang’s findings reinforce the need to be patient. The traditional view is that as you get older your chances of a breakthrough start to dim. “But what we’re saying is that’s actually not true,” he says. Keep at it and you may well triumph later — a possibility Wang views with great optimism: “Your best work may be still ahead of you.”

Wang’s exploration-exploitation pattern may help explain the trajectory of Maya Angelou. She endured the horrors of poverty, racism, and rape in childhood but went on to seize the best parts of living. In her 20s and 30s, she sang calypso in San Francisco, toured with “Porgy & Bess” in Europe, worked for the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and the Southern Christian Leadership Conference in New York, and became a journalist in Africa. Then, at midlife, she wrote her best-selling autobiography.



Poet Amiri Baraka and Maya Angelou dance during a celebration on the anniversary of poet Langston Hughes's birth in New York, Feb. 22, 1991. CHESTER HIGGINS, JR./NYT

Over the next four decades, Angelou produced numerous books of poetry and essays and six more memoirs. The final installment debuted the year she turned 85. Oprah Winfrey once recalled what Angelou told her when she turned 50: “Babe, the fifties are everything you’ve been meaning to be.” And once, when somebody asked Angelou about aging, she responded, “Do it. You don’t have much of a choice.”

## The fear of 40

Aging is something many prodigies don’t have the luxury of discovering. In my research, I explored the lives of young stars whose hyperfocus led to burnout. Judy Garland was 16 when she played Dorothy in “The Wizard of Oz”; she fatally overdosed on barbiturates at 47. Brookline native William James Sidis, a math and linguistics whiz in the early 20th century, enrolled at Harvard at the age of 11, where fellow students teased him. His first lecture to the university’s mathematics club, “Four

Dimensional Bodies,” made newspaper headlines, and he was hounded by the press.

Sidis hated the attention and craved anonymity. After mysteriously dropping out of law school in his final semester, Sidis took on a number of low-level accounting jobs and wrote several books under pseudonyms. In 1944, several months after settling a libel claim against The New Yorker for a publishing a profile suggesting he had not lived up to his potential, Sidis died of a cerebral hemorrhage at the age of 46.



"Starry Night" (1888) by Vincent van Gogh. The Dutch artist's posthumous fame might make him the latest bloomer of all. HERVÉ LEWANDOWSKI / RMN-GP/MUSEE D'ORSAY, PARIS/HERVÉ LEWANDOWSKI/© RMN-GRAND PALAIS / ART RESOURCE, N.Y.

It's not just prodigies we should worry about. The pressure on children to score well in school so that they can get into the most competitive colleges and land the most sought-after jobs may cheat them of their full potential. A 2018 report published by

the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation listed “excessive pressure to excel” as an impediment to adolescent wellness — along with poverty, trauma, sexism, and racism. “Adolescence should be and often is a time of wonder, optimism, and hope,” the authors write. “Yet, too often, adults fail to see adolescents this way.” Wang worries about young people in this ultra-competitive world. “We’re not allowing their experimentation phase,” he says.

It’s no wonder that anxiety and depression are rising among teens and young adults. National survey data shows that the proportion of Americans ages 18 to 25 experiencing anxiety jumped from 8 percent to more than 14 percent between 2008 and 2018; the proportion who said they had experienced at least one major depressive episode rose from 8.4 percent to 13.8 percent. The worrisome trends have only intensified during the coronavirus pandemic. A poll released by the American Psychological Association last month found that younger generations reported higher average stress levels than older ones.

The focus on early achievement, coupled with a widespread perception that “midlife” equals “crisis,” leaves many Gen Zs and Millennials in a panic about aging. “I talk to a lot of young people and they’re afraid of being 30, let alone 40,” says psychologist Margie E. Lachman, director of the Lifespan Development Lab at Brandeis University.

## **Mastery at midlife**

There’s no denying that the trials of juggling work, kids, elderly parents, and our own aging bodies can feel overwhelming in middle age, which Lachman defines roughly as the years between 40 and 65. But most midlifers don’t break down, she says, and many even thrive, buoyed by increased confidence and self-esteem.

Experience teaches us how to rebound from failures and work our way past obstacles, fueling a feeling of control that surges at midlife. We know what we can do, and we’ve got the knowledge and tenacity to take on new challenges. “Many people feel a sense of

mastery,” says Lachman. “Midlife is actually a good time. In some ways, it’s a peak time.”



Julia Child with a salade niçoise she prepared in her kitchen in the south of France in 1978. AP/ASSOCIATED PRESS

Even our brains step up. Scientists used to believe that the production of new brain cells, a dynamic process known as neurogenesis, ended in childhood. But research over the last two decades has found that neurons appear to be far more proliferative than previously thought. [In one study](#) published in 2018, scientists at Columbia University compared the brains of 28 human donors ages 14 to 79 who had died suddenly. To their surprise, the team discovered thousands of immature neurons in the hippocampi of older brains, an area involved in memory and learning. Imagine what we’re capable of if we harness this brainpower.

It’s true that our capacity to think quickly and solve new problems, an ability scientists

call “fluid intelligence,” declines as we get older, but we become more adept at using the wisdom we’ve acquired through years of living. This “crystallized intelligence” can balance out the losses. Memory blip? We learn how to deal with it. Slowing down? “That’s OK,” says Lachman. “You don’t have to be your fastest at everything.”

## **Bloom and bloom again**

Over time, life expectancy in the United States has increased significantly, from age 47 in 1900 to 77 in 2020. The numbers are fluctuating today — social and economic disparities shorten too many lives, and owing largely to the pandemic, between 2019 and 2020 life expectancy decreased by a year and a half, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. But on average, we will live longer than our grandparents. This means extra days, weeks, and months to pursue new interests or rediscover old ones.

Creativity — an amalgam of curiosity, openness to new experiences, imagination, and inventiveness — can flourish in mid- and later life. In a novel analysis of more than 3 million patents filed between 1976 and 2018, Lachman and her colleagues Adam Jaffe and Mary Kaltenberg made a fascinating discovery. Almost one-quarter of those who had filed more than one patent in their lifetime received their first patent after their 50th birthday. And just as many so-called career inventors were awarded their first patents in their early 50s as were in their early 20s. “There are inventors across the life cycle,” says Lachman.

Too many of us imagine aging as a steep ascent to midlife followed by a precipitous decline, until it’s all over. But what if we keep on climbing? Rich Karlgaard worked as a dishwasher and security guard after graduating from Stanford in the 1970s, long before he became publisher of *Forbes*. In 2015, after a cluster of suicides occurred in Palo Alto high schools, he decided it was time to start a conversation about late bloomers.

In his book, “Late Bloomers: The Power of Patience in a World Obsessed With Early Achievement,” Karlgaard writes that it’s not wrong to applaud early success. But, he says, obsessing over young achievers is detrimental to the rest of us, because it sends a message that “you’ve somehow made a wrong turn in life.”

Instead, Karlgaard suggests we embrace “serial blooming,” which he views as the natural course of development. We do one thing, we try another. We bloom and bloom again, he says.





Russell Banks, pictured here at the age of 22 in 1962, is still writing, and is more prolific than ever. He has written three books in the last 18 months. PETER SCHLAIFER

This made me think of my former colleague Lynn Staley, who took up drawing and painting after a career in magazine and newspaper design, including for the Globe. Staley has enjoyed becoming a beginner again — it’s refreshing and liberating — but she also relies on the training and rigor of her prior job.

“This is something I think I was meant to be doing, but I didn’t have the stamina or structure or discipline when I was younger,” she says. Next year, Staley’s oil portrait of the late Washington Post publisher Katharine Graham will be featured on a stamp issued by the US Postal Service. At 74, Staley says, she tries not to think about her age. “It piles up,” she says. “But it doesn’t define you.”

Serial blooming allows us to reshape the way we view the latter chapters of our lives — as opportunities for growth, rather than a prelude to death. In an interview with Max Linsky, host of the podcast “70 Over 70,” the author Russell Banks said he no longer struggles with the “static” — the anxiety and distractions — that disrupted his earlier work. And prior concerns about flaming out have vanished. “I just want to keep the motor running as long as I can,” he told Linsky. In the last year and a half, Banks has written three books.

Linsky, who is 40 (and Staley’s son), says he was surprised to discover how adamantly the guests he has interviewed over the last year feel about living in the present. “I went into this with this idea — it’s kind of embarrassing to say out loud — that we were going to talk about their glory years,” says Linsky. Instead, he heard some version of

“I’m just as alive now as I was then.”

## The power of purpose

We cannot pull the reins on the gallop of time, but we can control the way we think about the years and decades to come. The science of aging tells us that having a sense of purpose is good for our longevity. In a study of nearly 7,000 people conducted at the University of Michigan, researchers found that people without a strong sense of their “life purpose” were far more likely to die by the study’s end.

All of which is to say: How we feel about aging can help determine whether we age well — or not.

Spotlighting the achievements of midlifers and later bloomers uncovers truths about human potential that matter to all of us. I’m encouraged by Forbes’s decision earlier this year to launch its first “50 Over 50” series, featuring Kim Ng, who at 53 is general manager of the Miami Marlins, and 57-year-old Jennifer Doudna, co-developer of the

©2023 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC

And then there is “Julia,” a brilliant cinematic ode to midlife by co-directors Julie Cohen and Betsy West, who produced “RBG,” the 2018 documentary about Ruth Bader Ginsburg.



Julia Child cooking with Jacques Pépin in her Cambridge kitchen in 1999. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

“Julia,” also a documentary, which debuts in theaters nationwide this month, traces Julia Child’s life, from her childhood in Pasadena, Calif., to her final energetic years. At the age of 87, Child launched a 22-part television cooking series with chef Jacques Pépin.

I was especially struck by an early sequence from “The French Chef,” Child’s program on public TV. She is showing viewers how to grip the blade of a chopping knife between the forefinger and the thumb. As the camera zooms in, Child’s hands are revealed in their midlife splendor — spotted with age, just as her suprêmes de volaille aux champignons are flecked with parsley.

With a unique blend of unpretentiousness (she called herself a “cook” rather than a “chef”) and schmaltz, Child made meal preparation a bungling adventure, not a chore. She patted her ribs while talking about chicken parts, waved her rolling pin around

like a baton, and gleefully admitted mistakes.

Mid- and later life, with all its imperfections, steeped Child in an authenticity that seduced viewers. She looked like anyone's neighbor, only taller, without glamour or glitz. Her playful sense of humor and ebullient attitude instilled confidence in everybody watching that they, too, could whip up a lamb, goose, and sausage cassoulet. "This was a woman being very much herself at all times," says Cohen. "You can't fake that."

Toward the end of the film, an interviewer asks Child how long she plans to stay in television. "Well, till I drop, probably," she said.

And she just about did. In the film, Child's producer, Russ Morash, says, "She did not recognize her advancing age . . . She would not admit to it. She would not lie down to it."

A boon — and a lesson — for the rest of us.

[Claudia Kalb](#) is the author of *Spark: How Genius Ignites, From Child Prodigies to Late Bloomers*. Follow her on Twitter @claudiakalb.

Show 10 comments