

The New 'Age'  
of Leadership:  
The Power  
and Practices  
of Maturity  
*By Harriet Rubin*



The Dow isn't the only set of numbers on the rise these days: have you had a look at CEO's ages? Warren Buffett is almost 77 years old. Steve Jobs is 52, Bill Gates is 52, Phil Knight is 69. Who knows how old Rupert Murdoch is....maybe 120? The median age of the top executives of the Fortune 500 is 61. These numbers are creating a vast change in the idea and practice of leadership. It used to be that old leaders faded away. In Alfred Sloan's time, they migrated to board sinecures. They retired or handed the game off to young go-getters. Now they're staying in the game and, more importantly, revising the way the game of leadership is played.

### **And they are not giving up their power.**

Let's put a finer point on it: They are not reinventing leadership—they are rejuvenating it. They are not lions in winter, wise and slow-moving and deliberative. No. They are younger, in many ways, than they ever were. There is something wild about the leaders they have become. Warren Buffett, temperate and rational for many decades, is starting a trend in giving money away. Murdoch is putting down crazy-money trying to buy himself a jewel-in-the-crown property, Dow Jones. Ex-Disney CEO, Michael Eisner, is buying a comic book company. What happened to Peter Drucker's old notion of profit uber alles? What happened to reason, the bottom-line, winning at any cost? What happened is age, maturity, and a new kind of power called "the late-style." The key definition of this late-style change is doing pretty much the opposite of everything they spent their youth doing, chasing profit, markets, reputations, career, even, heaven-forbid, winning.

The rule book the Buffetts and Murdochs and other far-seeing leaders are following now, "the late-style," is new to business. It's the historic secret sauce, however, of artists. It's a new kind of more personal risk-taking, a new way of thinking, and it promises to make business a very exciting game for everybody.

### **HERE'S THE BASIC CREDO:**

Youth can never achieve anything. What can one enjoy at thirty? Young, you can't pick fruit from the tree you planted. You've had no time for joy or thought. You are more like a tortoise or a raven, living a bare animal existence: eating, sleeping, and procreating. But if you have years after youth, time in which to become a master—then you have everything life offers.

The business world fetishizes youth. But nature favors the ripe to the just picked. A young peach is bitter and hard. But a ripe peach is ambrosial...sweet, beautiful, almost a hallucinatory fruit. Similarly, a mature river cuts a deep swath into its bed, hence its waters run clear. Fresh cream is bland, but when it ages becomes Camembert, the cheese the French nickname Les Pieds du Dieux. The feet of God. Yes, good old fromage, courtesy of the same unappreciated French who gave America the ideas of freedom on which our Constitution rests. Age is valued in France.

## The business world fetishizes youth. But nature favors the ripe to the just picked.

Our best models as mature leaders are not Sloan or David Sarnoff, or the old greats, but artists. Composer Johann Sebastian Bach in his maturity wrote music for an instrument not yet invented, the clavier. Not many business leaders would typically make such a leap. Titian threw away the fine point brushes he used to create perfectly rendered paintings of kings that had won him international renown. Instead he began painting scenes of emotional conflict—and he painted them aggressively, manically with his thumbs—almost like a child.

*The purpose of this Manifesto is to introduce you to the practices of the late-style artists as they apply to business leaders who are finally in the position where they might be more concerned with achieving immortality than a strong quarter's profits.*

But first, here is a TEST designed to tell how mature you are in the realm of leadership?  
Do you have what it takes to become an immortal leader?

## 1. ASK YOURSELF, WHAT IS MY LEGACY?

Maturity and leadership begin with asking this question. The legacy question.

Over the next five years, we'll be saying good-bye to a generation of boomer leaders and managers—the oldest turns 61 this year. Boomers' retirement will peak in the next ten years, but the passion for legacy has already begun:

- Elizabeth Edwards announced that her cancer had returned and that she would still be out campaigning for her husband, John Edwards. "I don't want my legacy to be that I pulled somebody who ought to be president out of the race."
- President George Bush increasingly appears to be led by concerns for his legacy and so are the Republican candidates for the White House.
- Ronald Reagan on the cover of *Time* sheds a fictive tear for his legacy of neocons gone astray.
- Comedian Chris Rock explains going farther out on a racial ledge in his acts: "If you don't make history, you don't make a cent." Legacy is a real-time concern.

Do you know what your legacy is? Get self-conscious about your future...Make history...  
but make it NOW.

Come to grips with what your life in business has been all about. What have you contributed?  
Your family will remember you; but how about your other family, the people with whom you  
have spent a lifetime working?

## 2. TRUE OR FALSE: “JUST BEFORE PEOPLE STOP DOING SOMETHING, THEY DO MORE OF IT THAN EVER BEFORE.”

True. Just before people stop doing something, they do more of it than ever before. That’s what makes Bachelor Parties bacchanals. Afterwards, the groom pledges his troth and swears off his reckless ways.

Industries do it too. Look at Boeing. This year they had more orders for airplanes than they’ve had in the last five years. They cut production anyway. Why? Because they know that before people stop flying, the airlines get greedy, crazy, and they over-invest in planes. Then the market goes bust and no one orders Boeing planes for years.

This simple fact of human nature made Cabbage Patch Kids big, then bust, and the same with Hello Kitty dolls.

Similarly, before people retire, they try to work harder, or to be outrageous. They try to over-do or over-extend themselves or make risky decisions just to show they still have the juice.

If they don’t understand what makes some legacy leaders great, they can easily botch the process. There is no second chance at legacy.

To reach one’s late-style of leadership and make it a success, realize that endings must be as carefully planned as one’s first job.

Daniel Gilbert in *Stumbling on Happiness* says that endings rule. If a movie is boring or badly done, it’s still considered a triumph on one condition: if it ends smartly, happily, or satisfyingly.

Even a career that has a rocky start can mature into iconic power.

Dwelling on the issue of legacy is healthy. NY's Beth Israel Hospital geriatrician, Dr. Eric Walsh, says that he often sees people come down with fatal illnesses within a few months of retirement. "There is no medical basis yet known to explain this, but I see it regularly in my practice. Someone has just made the decision to spend his life playing golf and suddenly there is the worrisome cough, or fatigue, or disorientation. It's as if the immune system is geared to the body's work routine or a sense of ongoing usefulness. Overwork is bad, but just stopping cold is bad, too."

In order to have a brilliant legacy, ask yourself: What are you doing now that you want to do more of?

### 3. PRODIGIES? AREN'T THEY JUST KIDS?

Then take into account what talents you have as a late-life leader that you did not have as a young manager wannabe? Older leaders have talents unique to their age and maturity.

Prodigies are kids with off-the-chart talents: gifted kids who learn to tie their shoes and a week later learn to play Mozart's Requiem the way other kids can bang out Frere Jacques.

But there are mature prodigies, too. Maturity often comes with talents and gifts different from those of youth.

You see it in artists' late-style, but also in politicians' statesman years, or in what collectors call "the patina of civilization...."

One of the prodigies of maturity is gravitas: a kind of seriousness but also a quality of not caring what other people think. A sense that you have reached a level beyond criticism, a sense that you are "to the manor borne."

The core of the latent late-style is found in mature prodigies.

**Being comfortable with “going against” yourself.** The demands of the market aren’t as important to a mature leader as his own desires. When Howard Schultz of Starbucks sent around a memo recently lamenting the success Starbucks had become—a storefront on every corner, filling orders with automatic coffee machines instead of the talents of live baristas—he was in effect going against the achievements of his youth. Great leaders —same as great artists like Titian— distance themselves from the things of their youth in order to set out on a new path.

**Forget about what will sell.** Bach, in his late-style, created music for an instrument that had not yet been invented, the clavichord. Rembrandt created most of his self-portraits in his late period. Canvases of old men weren’t hot commodities, but Rembrandt’s desire was to satisfy his own journey or self-knowledge.

**Build a parallel establishment.** Queen Eleanor of Aquitaine, fed up with her husband and his blood lust and endless acquisitions schemes, created her own parallel organization, the Court of Love. It became a magnet for the young people of the 12th century who had grown disgusted with the cult of death and dying. Similarly, Eleanor Roosevelt built a shadow government to push her own agendas during the reign of her husband, FDR, who became known as Franklin Eleanor Roosevelt. The trick of being “part of and apart from”—that is, creating an organization that takes a main organization’s aims and turns it upside down—is a way to be a mature prodigy.

**Don’t impose your personality.** Abandon your interest in your own personality. I tell people that it took me twenty years to create Harriet Rubin. She grew up dirt poor and badly educated, but I reinvented her into a smart, clever entrepreneur. Now *that* personality gets in the way of my trying to do new things. I would not compare myself to Michael Eisner, but I bet Eisner’s personality gets in the way of everything he’s trying to accomplish today. You have to start wearing away, buffing off, that personality. The great poets and writers decided to stop cultivating their personality. Why?



Because having a personality narrows your presence in the world. It's very much like what the architect of the new Museum of Modern Art in NY told his patrons: "Raise a lot of money and I'll make you a beautiful building. Raise even more and I'll make the building disappear." He meant that a building that stands for the art inside it will become a cultural mecca. In terms of personality, this means that you give yourself to ideas bigger than you.

**Don't take anything too seriously, least of all yourself.** Julia Child became a servant of the art of cooking. She built a circle of influence of many young chefs, rather than an organization. Forget hierarchies: Frank Gehry said about the genius work he did rebuilding Disney's Symphony Hall at the age of 76: "It's so important to engage the audience, as do those so-called reality shows on television. What if each person in the audience was invited to sit next to a musician as they were playing. There are a lot of ways you could engage the public that haven't been played with. It would be interesting to take the orchestra from center stage and move them up on platforms around where the audience is and put the audience in the middle." [*Late Thoughts*, p. 107] Gehry and Julia Child love to play with certainties, their own and others. That is the mark of a very mature leader, one whose mature prodigies will take them far.

#### 4. QUICK, DRAW UP A LIST OF TWO GOALS. DON'T OVERTHINK THIS, JUST WRITE. THEN LOOK CAREFULLY AT WHAT IS YOUR SECOND GOAL.

CEOs often came to me when I had founded Currency, asking for my guidance in helping them write a book about their lives or work or both. Whether it was Andy Grove of Intel, Dee Hock (who founded VISA), Phil Knight or Howard Schultz who came to me wanting to write books—or create their legacy—I gave them all the same task: to take a clean sheet of paper and mark on one line the number one and on the second line the number two. Then they were to write down two dreams they had.

The first answer they gave was typically a safe answer. They said, Oh, I want to watch my grand-kids grow up, or I want to spend half the year on the beach in Australia and half on the beach in Vancouver. Or, I want to sit on boards and mentor other Chief Executives.

Then they named the second thing. It is usually something completely unexpected. Phil Knight said he wanted to build a wooden skyscraper. Andy Grove said he wanted to write murder mysteries. I've heard some say they wanted to climb Mt. McKinley. An advisor of Rupert Murdoch's wanted to go to school to study architecture.

The deepest leaders I have met know that there is something false in the expression of power. They see that more of the soul is recovered in moments of powerlessness.

The things people name second unveils some deep and long-held passion to experiment. It uncovers some untapped desire which has remained fallow, but strong enough never to die or to be lost in the sands of time. It speaks to a powerful person's desire to give up power and experiment with powerlessness. The deepest leaders I have met know that there is something false in the expression of power. They see that more of the soul is recovered in moments of powerlessness. Powerlessness forged a great Nelson Mandela, Vaclav Havel, and Dr. King. Deafness made Beethoven great. Leaders seek and fear powerlessness at the same time. The powerless thing is the second-named thing: something about what people name second embarrasses or shames them. That is where their soul becomes important.

The source of some shame, that second thing, gets a leader close to the source of his or her deepest and most satisfying creative desires. These desires are usually coupled by fears. You have to recognize that.

What's the second thing on your list? Chances are that it doesn't have anything to do with money or possessions. The thing that makes a mature leader mature is that he or she acts only to do things he wants to do. Nothing else. He's bought the longevity to do that.

## 5. CAN YOU LET THE PAST DROP AWAY?

Forget the past. Forget your old mistakes, the people you may have disappointed. Maturity is a new start at leadership.

Having reached the end of this little test, you might know how artists make the most of their late period—and how you might use their time-tested discoveries to become a leader who has achieved his own full maturity.

The thing that makes a mature leader mature is that he or she acts only to do things he wants to do. Nothing else. He's bought the longevity to do that.

## “I’M INTERESTED IN DOING ONLY THE THINGS I’M INTERESTED IN DOING.”

Age changes everything. The late-style is not about growing old nor is it about becoming an “elder.” “At age sixty-eight I’m every age I ever was,” said George Carlin. “I always think that I’m not just sixty-eight. I’m also fifty-five and twenty-one and three. Oh, especially three.”

Let’s call it The Buffett Age. At 56 or 66 or 76, the young-go-getter starts to look mighty shallow. It’s like putting Brittany Spears next to Aretha Franklin. Please.

One’s sense of time changes in late-style leadership. One becomes aware that the game to be played is for the stakes called immortality.

Business is written on sand. You make a decision one day and you adjust it the next, or it’s immediately forgotten in the thousand and one decisions made thereafter. Nothing lasts in business. It’s a game of firsts, of trends, of the newest new new.

Now, however, a cadre of leaders is confronting the fact that they are in their last decade or two of real working lives. They want to do something that lasts, that makes a difference, that makes them worthy of being remembered.

It’s not the work of ego; it’s just the opposite. It’s the work of self-erasure. No personality but in deeds.

## A LITTLE BACKGROUND ON WHY AGE = POWER

My friend, Harry, a classics scholar, tells me there aren't any old heroes in Greek or Roman mythology. Heroes experience successes early in their lives when they're young and strong. Young Beowulf kills the monster Grendel and exits the stage to live bravely ever after. King Arthur lived to a ripe age, but not as a hero. A youthful mistake comes back to bite him and he loses the kingdom of Camelot he built in his youth. Virgil draws the curtain on Aeneas after he founds Rome. Heroism is a young person's game, it would appear.

But Harry is wrong.

Make it to 50 or 60 or 70 and power is;  
it simply is. You don't need to climb a ladder  
or hierarchy to get it. You have it.

Real authority comes with age and maturity. Socrates at 70 defied state power to establish a greater truth. Beethoven's heartstopping compositions, created after he gradually went deaf, changed the nature of music. Siddhartha Buddha's eyes opened with new-found humility at 80 when he confronted death—his own. Abraham Lincoln's bold move to keep the U.S. unified against the threat of southern succession arose from the losses that burnished his own maturity.

The list of late-life heroes is long and distinguished. Churchill's statesmanship came long after his battlefield years. Architect Frank Gehry's masterwork, the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, was a gift of his seventies. Mark Rothko was age 56 when he finally stopped painting like Picasso and started painting like Mark Rothko. It's worth noting a canvas of his has just sold for \$72.8 million. Picasso too grew better as he grew older. So did the female Picasso, sculptor Louise Nevelson. Florence Nightingale created the plan for the sewers of London from her sickbed after years as a young woman fighting infection in soldiers in Crimea.

The list goes on and on. The women today who are turning the glass ceiling into a dust-flecked myth? They're all over 45.

Some people do the absolute best work of their lives when they are half to two-thirds done.

Maturity gives people a freedom to act that they never had before. It gives them:

- an expansiveness of gesture.
- an impatience with the need to finish things.
- a desire for the deeper truth.

Make it to 50 or 60 or 70 and power is; it simply is. You don't need to climb a ladder or hierarchy to get it. You have it. You only need to perform with full acceptance of this late-style power.

## WHAT'S SO SMART ABOUT THE SMARTEST GUYS IN THE ROOM?

It's taken the West more than 500 years to cotton on to this.

All the leadership primers we have are written for kids. Business literature is at its heart children's literature. *The Prince*—which is read in business schools and studied by the elite US Army Delta Forces—was written for the very immature Italian prince, Lorenzo Medici. When author and strategy guru, Machiavelli, handed the boy the first edition of his divide-and-conquer wisdom, Lorenzo turned away to play on the floor with dalmations presented him by the Ambassador from Malta. Similarly *The Art of War* is a manual by a Chinese general to make his young samurai think, not just fan out into the countryside like a bunch of “Running With Scissors” (well, samurai knives) kids.

No wonder we got to a point where Enron marauders were considered ‘The Smartest Guys in the Room’ even as they were bankrupting 10,000 shareholder families. Leadership is determined by a basic formula of young yahooism.

So how can we lead with maturity whatever our age?

## WHAT IS THE LATE-STYLE?

The late-style is defined in two ways. One, it is the recognition of leaders that they want to do only what they want to do. If what they want to do makes no sense in business terms, it's business terms that have to shift. Not the people.

The relevant word is maturity. Mature comes from *matuta*, the Latin for new dawn. Maturity is not the end of something; it's the beginning, a rejuvenation of old ways.

“We think of maturity as having gone through a mid-life crisis. But maturity is a different relationship to your goal. Not a search for physical perfection or some type of spiritual and mental power. Typically, maturity is when individuals go into themselves and ask what is really important: ‘Can I use my influence to make life easier for as many people as possible?’ If we aim just for the maximum gain for ourselves, we’ve already see that it won’t be better for everybody, nor will it make us happier.” So says Scott Bartchy who heads UCLA’s Dept of Religious Studies.

Maturity is a recognition that a leader is no different from the rest of humanity. Not a celebrity. Not chosen by God to have a lock on the good life, but vulnerable to the human condition. And so there is a calling to create something for a common humanity, for the general good.

It’s no surprise that everyone is going green now. Green is old people’s nostalgia for youth, and for an interest in nature, and in doing something that has a wider than individual good.

Historians Karen Painter and Thomas Crow in *Late Thoughts* note that “[i]nstitutions too may function in an awareness of an approaching end. Their members sense the closing of an era.” Things start with idealism and innovation, move to bureaucratic infighting and short-sighted compromises that pave the way for repression and trouble. This is how the Nazis seized power from the Weimar government. The challenge is to use late-style leadership to transform troubled societies and institutions.



## WHAT WOULD THE LEADERSHIP CANON LOOK LIKE IF MORE EXAMPLES CAME FROM MATURE LEADERS?

What is it to lead with the qualities of maturity? Everyday I hear someone whine, “Why are there no leaders today?” Google the phrase “leadership vacuum” and you’ll find close to two million entries, as if it were a ghost, not just a nullity but a real existential anxiety, an absence filled by hidden terrorists. If leaders build, more power seems to go to destroyers these days. So we must be without real leaders. Real leaders would not have let Enron, MCI, NYSE, etc., happen.

When people ask, “Where are the leaders?” I wonder: What are we, chopped liver?

Millions of Baby Boomers are leading and managing the greatest companies and political organizations throughout the world. We are the ‘Internet Generation’, the architects of global business, of record Dow Jones earnings. So why are people still asking, where are the leaders? Maybe what they are really asking is, Where are the mature leaders?

Mature leadership is in you, if you take up the challenge to rejuvenate your skills, as the great artists and statesmen have done.

Maturity reverses much of the leadership methods we have learned, because those methods are based on childish ways.

Mature leadership follows a different canon:

- Youth says time is of the essence. Be first or be fast. Maturity does not care about being first.
- Youth insists on productivity. Do a lot, network, take notes, speak up. Maturity says, recede. There is more power in doing less, in making a few bold invitations to others to help. The phrase that pays in maturity: “unproductive productivity,” meaning that you spend a lot of time thinking, learning, experimenting, not looking for home-runs. Immortal works were created when the artists were working solely for themselves—a freedom the mature have earned.
- Youth says, follow trends, be original. Maturity says, dare to be anachronistic, or out of time. Don’t be a slave to fashion. Follow your own drives and desires, look to what lasts, not what is new.

Maturity reverses much of the leadership methods we have learned, because those methods are based on childish ways. Effective for one kind of power, but not for immortality.

Take the case of Shakespeare. A budding genius in his youth, he out-did himself in age; he matured like luscious grapes into an immortal wine. He stopped writing thrill ‘em, kill ‘em tragedies where kings and criminals, Macbeth, Hamlet, Harry, Othello, Caesar, left no one standing. He switched to writing beautiful human comedies. What happens in these comedies is the very opposite of what happens in tragedy. In tragedy, happiness gives way to disaster and ruin. In comedy, a tragedy ends happily. Impossible loves are forged, enemies become friends, great truces are struck.

This is one of the great powers of maturity: leaders switch from being tragic heroes where they are fighting the forces of evil (like *The Prince*). They instead become comedic heroes intent on making their wildest dreams come true.

You see this particularly in women leaders. Julia Child's first cookbook was rejected by publishers. She persisted, got it published, then began the first television cooking show, creating not just a new industry but a progeny of chefs, new cultural leaders. How did Julia draw attention and motivate generations of cooks? Not by becoming professorial.

She became a mixture of Lucille Ball and L'Escoffier. She let her comic side run wild, hacking chickens like Sweeney Todd, tossing ever more Cabernet into the stew pot.

One sees this too in the mature Dalai Lama: a smile is always playing about his face. He knows that not to take anything too seriously is to defeat any threat. The reason: laughter turns enemies into equals and co-conspirators.

It's not passive resistance, as Gandhi and Dr. King practiced. It's laughter resistance.

It was as if Shakespeare in his late-style calmed down. He didn't need to write big, powerful dramas. He won more audiences by using humor, even to tell a sad story. *King Lear* is such a sad play that theater directors rewrote the ending and performed it without Cordelia dying for many years, because audiences were leaving performances of *Lear* so depressed that they never went back to the theater. But in time, the part of *Lear's* comic fool became played by more accomplished actors who made the role bigger, freeing actors to play Lear in a way that evoked sympathy and recognition, not despair.

Time and again, you read of artists whose greatest genius flowers late. William Butler Yeats wrote his best work the year before his death. Emily Dickinson received a marriage proposal after fifty and wrote what many consider her best poems in her mature years.

Look at Jimmy Carter: A failure as our then youngest president. A genius as an elder statesman.

## PEOPLE ARE LIKE COUNTRIES—THEY TEND TO GET SMARTER AS THEY GET OLDER

Leaders are growing bored with the old agenda to dominate, crush or win. They are discovering different goals, new strengths, unexpected desires.

What makes some people better after their youth has wilted? How do they confront the waning of their high energy lives? Once they made their “piles,” what kept them hungry for new accomplishments? Was their youth an indicator of how successful their second-lives would be?

Was winning—the promotion, the raise, the recognition—the only thing that kept leaders in the game? Or was it something else?

I discovered that one’s successes in youth are not necessarily any indication of how mature a leader will be.

Imagine, business where people care enough not about winning profits but about making a difference that lasts through the winds of time.

I discovered that with boomers aging as they are now, many are planning their exit strategies, but not from business. They want to go on, or start anew, a dream deferred.

There are ways in which youth rejuvenates itself late. Men experience a leap by which a different kind of effectiveness lets their talents shine. Women become more successful in the later years when they fear they might have become invisible, passed over by young hotties. All of them found this new way of leadership.

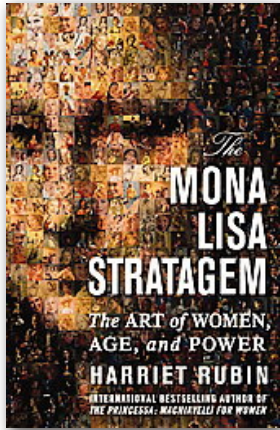
## AN INVITATION

The great artists of the Renaissance were alchemists. They were consumed with the magic they thought practical, like trying to turn feathers into lead and lead into gold. Perhaps if they had lived a bit longer, they would have solved all the riddles of existence. But they did achieve one stellar discovery: one of them learned to stop time. Leonardo Da Vinci rode to immortality with one tiny painting made of grapeseed oil. Da Vinci lives today through his portrait of the *Mona Lisa*. It has become the most powerful painting of all time. It looks as if it is very old, yet also completely modern. Thousands of people travel each year to stare at her for one minute. They walk away feeling their lives have been changed. They never forget the moment in which they saw her. That is alchemy. That is immortality.

You as a generation of new mature leaders are unlike the Greatest Generation. You are creating a new model of immortal leadership. Or mature leadership. Your stories are brand new, and taken together, will create a new practice of organizational governance. Imagine, business where people care enough not about winning profits but about making a difference that lasts through the winds of time.

Write and tell me your story. I will help you refashion it into your own legacy.

Reach me at [www.harrietrubin.com](http://www.harrietrubin.com) or [hrrubin@aol.com](mailto:hrrubin@aol.com)



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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

I have studied leadership development for the last twenty five years. In the 1980s, I published the first business bestseller in 30 years, a book describing a brand new business method: *Theory Z*, the clarion call on the power of Japanese management and how Toyota and others were about to eat Detroit's lunch. In the 90s, I started the first business book division, Currency, devoted to the changes a new cadre of workers—Baby Boomers—were making in organizations. After leaving Currency, I wrote books as well as for *Fast Company* and *Inc.*, and more recently *The Wall Street Journal*. This May, Warner published *The Mona Lisa Stratagem: The Art of Women, Age and Power*, which is the basis of the ideas in this manifesto.

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