

Strauch, B. (2010) *The Secret of the Grown-Up Brain*. New York: Penguin Books.

Manifesting and Aging: A Magical Combination

To make the best use of your aging brain, appreciate its versatility and creative force!

Book Review by Alexandra Pett

Have you ever wondered if you had the brain power to write a book, to start a new business, or to lead a different lifestyle? Can today's research findings help you?

Recently, an Alchemist friend and colleague passed me a book called *The Secret Life of the Grown-Up Brain: The Surprising Talents of the Middle-Aged Mind* by Barbara Strauch. It provides the optimistic results of new research into the middle aged and aging brain. For example, according to Strauch, we believe certain aspects of life span (such as mid-life crisis and empty nest syndrome) exist in our own lives on the flimsiest of evidence (2010, p. 53). The truth may be that people's aging brains are able to take in information, think big, and develop versatility in ways unknown to younger folk.

As many people past fifty already appreciate, we are likely to improve as human beings and enjoy life more than we did in earlier stages of life. Forgetfulness is not a sign of illness, and as people's minds age, they change and evolve for the better.

How does this happen? We experience what experts call "the positivity effect" (p. 37) that allows us to avoid reliving painful events from the past. Strauch states: "We focus more on the positive as we age because we want to" (p. 37). With less time left potentially in our life span, we want to enjoy more of life. Moreover, "it's the best brains, the brightest brains, that have the most bias toward the positive" (p. 37). Younger people need to think critically and even to be negative, but as we age, we want to be more group conscious, drawing on past experiences; this is called the "Grandmother Hypothesis" (p. 38).

No doubt exists about the decline in the human brain in aging, but experts now regard this deterioration more positively than before. ". . . a little age-related decline—even in the area of focus—may work in your favour" (88). We are more distracted by what goes on but also more likely to have stored information that can be drawn upon. We let in random information at times but it can be useful. At times what seems interference becomes "a real benefit in a an often chaotic world where it's not always clear what will be pertinent in the end" (p. 88).

We know that mandatory retirement ages do not at present correspond to the life cycles of individuals, especially those who have learned how to extend the resilience of brain cells. Many talented middle age and beyond people can see the big picture and vision success at least as effectively as those earlier in their careers.

This book on research findings of brain activity offers some suggestions for those in search of brain power: eat less because a thin body is good for the mind (p.165); ingest antioxidants "such as grape seed extract, anti-inflammatory agents such as spirulina and aspirin, and even statins, which lower cholesterol levels and may help blood vessels in the brain as well" (p.158); exercise on a regular basis and use brisk walking to boost thought patterns; and apply the theory of "cognitive reserve" (p.110).

Research has shown that those who are educated are more likely to postpone the effects of declining mental capacity. Strauch summarizes the findings (p. 106 to 122) on how cognitive reserve is linked to education. To date, disagreement exists, yet those who are better educated and better fed early in life seem to have the best chance to offset dementia. Brains do change, however, and what new experiences alter old patterns.

When I read Strauch's book, I was persuaded by the theories, but not all the evidence. If older people are happier than youngsters, how do we explain the grumpy old man stereotype? Or

the crone with the wicked tongue? What about brilliant individuals who lose mental capacity? Have they merely postponed illness through cognitive reserve, only to have it arrive when least expected? Or have they overused one aspect of their minds at the expense of the other?

So maybe I will return to the large body of literature on multiple intelligences or emotional intelligence or the search for simplicity in the feng shu environment.

And I will start my personal mission statement as a wannabe writer by listening to the taped series called Transforming Authors.

The overview first tape in this training program for manifesting the talent and persistence to produce a book asks us to consider these four aspects: self, reader, business, world. Many creative people want to publish a book but lack the business skills, and many businesses want to see a book in print but have no one with the creativity to write it.

Using the power of intention is a key step. Writers need to know what their intention is in taking the transformational author training and in writing and publishing the book. Here is the list of questions to begin with:

1. Why am I writing this book?
2. Why am I the right person to write the book?
3. Why is this the right time to write this book?
4. Who are my intended readers for this book?