



Musings on retirement

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Like many others, much of my happiness, sadness, and meaning in life come primarily from two sources—family and work. I have a great family and a great job as a nurse, a professor of nursing and public health at a prestigious university, and as an editor of an international scientific journal. I am 76 years old and my parents and grandparents have all lived well into their 90s-100s so am fortunate to work at an institution that doesn't have a mandatory retirement age as long as you are productive and useful. After more than 55 years of working full time, however, I have made the scary and difficult decision to retire in less than a year and I want to describe how I came to that decision.

First, a few comments about the word “retirement,” which is actually a relatively new term in our society. In the old days, people worked until they were either too sick, too disabled, too tired, or dead. Or they didn't work because they had other means to make a living or, more likely, couldn't find a job. The idea of “retirement” without one of these reasons is a relatively new phenomenon. Even until recently the time between when you stopped working and died was short, perhaps just a few years, whereas nowadays this could be decades (Laskow, 2014; Weisman, 1999).

Unfortunately, the term “retirement” has not only evolved but it also conjures up derogatory images for many—someone in their pajamas lying on a sofa watching TV, for example. Most elders like me have no intention of doing that! Nevertheless, the prevailing attitude seems to be that people should retire in their 60s to make room for the next generation, and what they do after they retire is likely to be uninteresting and not very useful (unless they plan to babysit for their grandchildren so that their children can pursue their own interesting careers). For that reason, I am going to refer to my retirement as the next transition

in my career development. This phase is referred to as the “gadfly” stage by McBride, during which one continues to contribute to the discipline, but is freed from institutional obligations (McBride, 2011).

So how did I decide to make this transition? When I hit my 60s, I certainly shared the attitude that elders should move on and get out of the way of others, but my work still seemed to be useful and productive and I just wasn't ready to stop. I did begin to feel the subtle innuendos of ageism, however, with people in the guise of concern asking, for example, what my future plans might be. So I tried hard to avoid conversations about age and certainly never mentioned my own age. When I hit the seventh decade, I realized that was not only futile but that I was buying into the stereotype about older folks—the group in which I was now a part. So I stopped worrying about whether people knew or cared about my age. But I have seen folks who over-stay their usefulness at work and have myself complained about someone who should have quit when they were ahead, so I also realized that I had to think about my own transition and not wait until people breathed a sigh of relief that I was finally gone.

We live in a society that is fast-paced, technologically focused, and changing with lightning speed. In fact, although I try hard to keep up with rapidly evolving technology, many (perhaps most) of my students and younger colleagues are much more facile than I in that regard. That makes me somewhat concerned, but on the other hand, I have greater clarity regarding what matters and am enriched by experience, perspective, and (hopefully) wisdom that only come with years. Like many elders I feel like I am just “getting it” when it's time to move on.

Certainly not all elders are wise, however. Wisdom doesn't just happen, but it does come to those who use

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mindfulness, empathy, and self-reflection to learn from their mistakes, failures, and successes over the years, so when you are ready to “retire” you may have less energy and ambition to succeed but you may actually also have better ideas about how to make things work more effectively.

Nevertheless, to everything there is a season. I recently read an article in the Sunday New York Times entitled “The Joy of Being a Woman in Her 70s” confirming that most women don’t feel like the cultural stereotypes of older women—that they are “bossy, useless, unhappy and in the way.” The clinical psychologist author pointed out that with age we develop resilience, can be kinder to ourselves and adopt reasonable expectations, find more to appreciate, and still have choices, recognizing that the only constant in our lives is constant change (Pipher, 2019).

Indeed, I share the sentiments of George Bernard Shaw, who said:

I am of the opinion that my life belongs to the whole community and as I live it is my privilege—my privilege—to do for it whatever I can. I want to be thoroughly used up when I die, for the harder I work the more I love. I rejoice in life for its own sake. Life is no brief candle to me; it is a sort of splendid torch which I’ve got ahold of for the moment and I want to make it burn as brightly as possible before handing it on to future generations (Shaw, 1990).

So I am ready, fearful, and excited about this next transition and committed to use whatever skills I have to continue to try to make the world around me a better place (and maybe challenge the stereotypes about old people). To my younger colleagues, I say “Take it from here, enjoy the ride, get wise, and wish elders like me god speed as we approach the next challenges. Maybe we still even have something to share with you.”

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