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RETIREMENT: GETTING THERE AND BEING THERE

I would like to begin with different questions than the ones we usually ask about retirement: Will I have enough money? How long before I retire? Should I work as long as possible or take early retirement? Where will I live? All of these questions are important, but I want to focus on the two other questions: How do we prepare for retirement and who will we be and what will we do when we retire?

I. GETTING THERE

That's easy enough: Just wait. In due time you'll get there. You wait until you are sixty five or whatever age has been determined by some external agency as the time for you to retire. You'll get there soon enough, sooner than you expect. The trick is to get there as creatively as possible. The question in getting there is what to do in the meantime. And what you do in the meantime will have much to do with what you do during retirement.

It isn't as simple as just waiting. One of my teachers when I was an undergraduate once said to us that it was not too early to begin planning now to learn to grow old gracefully. Those of us who have gotten old — or older — know that advice is difficult to follow. Still his comment may have been worth the price of my undergraduate education. To grow old requires planning. So does preparation for retirement.

In the meantime, there are things to be done. Not the least of these is somehow to maintain an interest in and a concern for the life of which we are now a part, particularly for our profession where we spend much of our time. It won't do just to wait, tempting as it is, to let retirement come, hope for it, dream about it, letting the days slip by. .

What we do before we retire affects what we do after we retire. Most of us have no difficulty answering the question of what to do before retirement. While I was teaching, I could never fully understand Sinclair Lewis's comment in Main Street that "The greatest mystery about a human being is not his reaction to sex or praise, but the manner in which he contrives to put in twenty-four hours a day," There was no mystery about how to put in twenty four hours a day. The mystery was how to find some of those twenty-four hours a day for oneself, for reading, for loafing and inviting one's soul.

I suspect that most of us find that our work keeps us busy enough not to worry about how to put in twenty-four hours of our day. Most teachers work hard, work long hours. There aren't very many who work only forty hour weeks. . While some people, some would say most people, find their work so numbing that they look forward to retirement, others enjoy their work, enjoy being busy, even finding time for reading and contemplating. We honor work in America. Hard work is high on our list of values. Our language reflects our attitude toward the active life, toward work.

We are an active, energetic, dynamic, brisk, alert, wide-awake, vigorous people, and we express those traits in the verbs we use. We act, strive, perform, achieve, work, pursue, win, operate, hustle, race, push ahead, make progress, keep moving and hurry. We buy, sell, collect, trade, bargain, negotiate, invest and change. We modify, alter, tamper with, transform, innovate and revolutionize. We talk, chatter, speak, and gossip. Active verbs like the active life please us. They have a healthy wholesome sound, whereas passive verbs like being, abiding, enduring, prevailing, relating and especially the forms of the verb to be—is, am, was, were, are—seem inert, moribund, unhealthy — un-American. Even the once pejorative word for the person driven by work — workaholic — has taken a positive connotation.

We distrust the person who thinks too much, who enjoys leisure and contemplation. That has an effect on our attitude toward retirement.

But we also know people who do little more than wait, wait and count the years, or the months, or, in some instances, the days until their retirement, reliving the same experience with the same lesson plans year after year. Such people must be miserable, must not enjoy their work.

Too many people today have jobs that are dull, repetitious, boring; consequently they live, as Thoreau said too many of his neighbors lived, lives of quiet desperation, their resignation to their jobs in reality a "confirmed desperation," a stereotyped but unconscious despair . . . concealed even under what are called the games and amusements of mankind," "their highest duty to fodder and water their horses." Or today our highest duty is to turn on the TV and watch the basketball tournaments. Fortunately there are others, many I hope, who like what they are doing too much to count the days until retirement.

But whether we enjoy our work our tolerate it or hate it, all of us must come to terms with our work and make the most of it until we retire. For the work that we do and the attitude with which we do it does affect the way in which we will retire.

I remind you of the old story of the people who moved to a new community and asked a wise woman what the people there were like. Were they considerate, happy, contented? Did they like the community? Did they enjoy their work?

The wise old woman asked the new inhabitants what the people in their old community were like. Their answer would determine their response to the people in the new community. If they found their old neighbors interesting, friendly, kind, then that's the way they would find the people in the community to which they were moving. If they found the people in their old community dull, uninteresting, hard to get along with, then that's what they would find in the new community.

I tend to think that people who find their work interesting, challenging, fascinating, who have learned to make what they do matter will most likely find retirement as interesting, challenging and fascinating as their work was.

I suspect that people who count the years, months and days before retirement will after retirement count the months or the days before they can go to Florida and once there count the days before they can come home.

I'm suggesting, then, that before retirement people had better learn to live hopefully, creatively, and courageously. Retirement does not break old habits, old ways of thinking. Old ways will not change with increased leisure, with fewer responsibilities, with less pressure. If you are bored now, I predict that you will be bored when you retire. Only more so.

If you are bitter now you will be bitter when you retire. If you hate your work now, you will hate retirement.

Somewhere in the middle of "Groundhog Day" Bill Murray, who isn't retired, turns to the man sitting beside him at a bar and says in a voice of utter despair: "What would you do if you were stuck in one place and every day was the same and nothing mattered." Too often people feel that way: they are stuck, truly stuck in their rut and there is no tomorrow, or, more accurately, tomorrow is simply another today. It is difficult to live deliberately twenty-four hours if that is the case. But living deliberately is never easy, either before or after retirement. Retirement may help, but living as if it mattered is, as Kant says Philosophy is, "Eine unentliche aufgabe," a never finished obligation. And I can assure you that there are still 24 hours in the day after retirement, and sometimes every day is the same as all the other days, one morning inevitably looks much like the one before it.

II. BEING THERE

When we get there we don't have the preoccupation with work that we have since our youth become accustomed to. Perhaps we do. That good people work is such a strong part of our life that we don't lose the work ethic easily. Soon after we learn to talk we learn to ask, sometimes a hundred times a day, "What can I do now? When we retire the question sometimes takes on as much urgency as it did when we were children, and we run the danger of echoing one of the child's most common remarks: "I'm bored." But we like to brag that even if we are retired, we are just as busy as ever, if not busier.

We may wish for the more contemplative life, the examined life, realizing with Socrates that the unexamined life is not worth living, but our busy lives preclude such examination, for that examination requires silence, for only in silence can we contemplate. Only in silence can we acquire a sense of curiosity, a sense of wonder which we will need when we retire.

And then we retire and are shocked how much we have been taught that work is necessary, that without it our lives are incomplete. It's a shock when we retire to discover that the work is not there, at least not the same old work. The telephone does not ring as often as it used to. We don't get as much

first-class mail as we used to — but probably more junk mail and more complicated income tax form and the bills still come. Notices of meetings, directives from administrators, reminders that reports are overdue, no longer show up in our mail boxes. Instead of giving test results we now get them from our doctors.

Accustomed to regular hours, to a shape for the week which made it possible to distinguish between a week day and a week end, between Wednesday and Friday, being retired means that the days of the week no longer have the familiar shape. Now all days are like week ends used to be. Last Friday one of my friends saw me and was grateful that it was Friday, and then quickly said: "I guess for you retired people every day is Friday."

Retired people no longer have to be at work by eight. They can sleep in if they can sleep. No one tells them what to do and when. And that can be troubling. How does one fill a day where there are no landmarks except the meals, and even those can be varied now, if necessary.

It's a shock to wake up in the morning and realize that we do not have to go to work, that we do not even have an office. We begin to realize that we are now on our own, that our life is not structured for us, imposed on us by conditions not of our own making. We now make our own schedule, determine how we will fill our twenty four hours.

Retired people understand Lewis's musing about twenty-four hours a day. To get up in the morning without a schedule is, for many, disconcerting. I have asked some of my friends if they had difficulty adjusting to the change of pace and almost always their answer is, "Of course. The days have lost their structure." .

Perhaps we can overcome that sense of futility. At least retirement gives us that opportunity. Perhaps we can overcome that one inescapable day lived over and over by asking a different question than "What can I do to fill up our days and nights?" important that question is.

There is, I think, a question that is even more important than the question of what we will do after retirement, and that is the question of what we will be. If we can answer the question of who we will be then we will have less difficulty answering the question of what we will do.

To get at my point I want to take you round Robin Hood's barn once at least, maybe twice. Think for a moment what you would want a stranger with whom you have started a conversation, say at a party, to know about you. Suppose that he — or she — was audacious and asked you bluntly, as I am asking you now, to indicate what three things, not counting your name, you would want to tell that person about yourself that would facilitate the conversation, that would give that person some indication of who you are. The answer depends, of course, on the situation. I have at times asked a class on the first day to write down three things they would want me and the rest of the class to know about them that would help us all to help them learn to write. The question always take them aback; they are puzzled. Just what should the teacher and the class know about them that would help them to learn to write.

.Usually the answers are not very helpful. They vary from comments like "I don't like to write," or "I am interested in cars" — or rap music, or horses and whatever else students are interested in today—to "I don't know what you need to know about me." No one has ever said that they like to be alone more than with company, that they like to read Thoreau (although they will say that they like to be out of doors), or Shakespeare, that they are a Lutheran or a Socialist or even a Republican.

Then I ask the students to turn over the paper and write three questions on the other side that they would like to ask me and the rest of the class that would help them engage in learning to write. The questions are interesting. Some in the 1970 wanted to know why I grew a beard; others wondered about my family; some wanted to know if I were a hard grader or if I paid much attention to spelling and grammar; others wanted to know why I had chosen to be a teacher and if I enjoyed teaching.

But I've gone round Robin Hood's barn long enough, and I'm back now to the question: What are we going to be when we retire?

I asked a friend of mine what three things he would tell a stranger to let him know who he is. He immediately said "I am what I do. I am a Lutheran Minister. I am the chaplain at a Lutheran college. The first two identifiers came easily. He knew what he did; then he thought a while before he said: "I'm busy as hell." He did not know the purpose of my question until I pointed out to him that none of these images of himself would be true after he retired.

The implications of the question should be quite clear by now. We have more difficulty explaining who we are than explaining what we do. Perhaps a story will help make my point clear. After years of struggle India had finally achieved her independence from England, and Gandhi was asked by a newspaper reporter: "Now that India is free, what will India do?" Gandhi looked at the reporter and said, "You must be an American reporter, for only an American would ask the question in that way."

"Then how should I ask the question?" the reporter asked. "In India," Gandhi said, "we would ask not what will India do but what will India be."

To answer the question of who you are rather than what you do is to face Gandhi's question. Who we are implies a continuity which the question of what we do does not. When we retire what we do will change. Who we are, on the other hand, will not necessarily change, at least not as much.

One of the preparations for retirement, then, should be to be as well as do, to identify ourselves by who we are as well as by what we do.

I'd like to go back to my pastor friend. He thought about my comment that none of the identifiers he listed would be true when he retired. He went on to say: "You're right of course, and I am much more than a Lutheran preacher. I am curious about many things. I read everything I have time to read. (Someone told me that when he left the British Museum, he wept because he would not live long enough to read all the books there, or at least a part of all the books in that hugh library). I thrive on the mystery of this cock

eyed world. I want to know. I want to question. I want to talk. None of those will be gone when I retire."

Milton Macer, who was once described as a Jewish Christian Quaker a few years before he died was sitting in the office of a college president. Macer had his feet on the desk of the president. The president kicked off his shoes and told Macer some of his troubles. "What you need," Macer said, "is time off to think." No thanks the president said: If I had time off to think "I would have to think about why I am not a socialist, a pacifist and a Christian." Most of us would think about different things than this unnamed college president, but many of us discover that we don't really want to think much about things that bother us. We would rather be busy than ask ourselves just what is our name or to take that long hard look at ourselves, realizing that if we look at ourselves long enough we might see ourselves, and that would be painful.

Retired persons can know leisure to become detached from the busy world. They can know the freedom to play and dream. They can talk and they can listen, and they can also experience the silence they so often longed for before retirement. They can unabashedly wonder about the world we share. And or a time all that shocks them but after a time they realize that it is all worth it.

How then do we spend our time when we retire? One thing we can do is to pay more attention to who we are, to what we think, to how and what we love. And that means reading and thinking about what we read, contemporary books, yes, but also books you have never found time to read like, well for beginners, The Bible, and reading the Bible not just a small section at a time, but in large chunks, say "Isaiah" or "Job." Or Shakespeare's King Lear, Hamlet, Othello or Goethe's Faust or Milton's Paradise Lost, or Melville's Moby Dick. Although I've read Melville's Moby-Dick at least twenty five times, I want to read it again. The last time I read it I was convinced that you have to be sixty before you begin to understand it.

I am not suggesting that you do put off reading until you retire. If you can't find time now to read, you probably won't find much more time after you retire. If you read Jon Hassler now or Bill Holm or Will Weaver or Carol Bly, Patricia Hampl and Meridel LeSueur now, you will continue to read them but with added delight after you retire.

We need to develop individual interests that satisfy us, even when others may find them strange. Or boring. And those interests, need not be limited to reading. They can include bird watching, cloud watching, watching sunsets, photography, identifying plants and trees, gardening, walking, writing your autobiography, writing letters, tracing the genealogy of your family, going to Elderhostles, which have opened many social and intellectual opportunities for people over sixty.

And don't ignore writing. Letters have been and should still be a way of recording what we are doing. Letters, like all writing, are a way of discovering what we think, and sharing those thoughts with friends old and newspaper. E-mail has its uses, but letters are better. Retired people have time

to write a letter of thanks to authors whose books they have enjoyed. They have the opportunity thoughtfully to address current problems in letters to the editors and perhaps on the op ed page of their

Or try writing poems or short stories. A retired couple who lived in Edina, a well-to-do healthy, couple, now seventy five and eighty years old, instead of moving to California where their children lived, moved to Duluth, a town they had always liked. Now she writes poetry, good poetry, a friend of mine who is a poet tells me. He asked her how long she had been writing poetry, and she said just for the last few years. Her husband is learning woodworking, and they are enjoying themselves very much more than they would have in a retirement community in a warmer climate.

Compare that with another story. A young woman told me that her father who had spend his working years collecting old implement parts — he had a marvelous collection of old tractor seats — sold them for scrap iron when he retired and now spends his time listening to talk shows. The last time I talked to my thesis advisor, he told me that he had quit doing research and reading and now spent most of his time watching television. What a waste!

And retired people can — and I think should — consider writing their memoirs for their children and grandchildren and to their friends. Updike in Selfconsciousness includes a letter to his grandchildren in which he tries to tell what their roots are like. Annie Dillard has given us a lively account of what it meant to grow up in Pittsburgh in her book An American Childhood.

All of us have interesting lives. A retired minister was reminiscing one evening about his life. He had gone through a troublesome divorce late in his ministry. His children had often disappointed him, brilliant as they are. But he summed up his life by saying: "I don't think anyone has lived a life any more interesting than mine." A modest person, not given to boasting, but he was aware of how many friends, of how much his Finnish background meant to him, of how many good books he had read and was still reading, and how much he could still enjoy good talk.

We can look at retirement with the same attitude that Thoreau went to the woods: to learn "to live deliberately, to front only the essential facts of life, and see If we can not learn what it has to teach, and not, when we came to die, discover that we have not lived. We do not, [if we are wise] wish to live what is not life, living is so dear. . . . We want to live deep and suck out all the marrow of life, to live so sturdily and Spartan-like as to put to rout all that is not life, to cut a broad swath and shave close, to drive life into a corner, and reduce it to its lowest terms, and, if it proves to be mean, why then to get the whole and genuine meanness of it, and publish its meanness to the world; or if it is sublime, to know it by experience. . . "

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