

Retiring to What?

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In 1973 I joined the staff of McLean Hospital, a private psychiatric hospital in the Boston area. My first position at McLean was as head of the school in the locked door unit of the child and adolescent program. As I have frequently mentioned in my writings and workshops, my experiences in that position were to serve as a major catalyst for my adoption of a strength-based approach in which I increasingly focused on identifying and reinforcing the strengths or “islands of competence” of my patients. I did not ignore or minimize their problems, but rather I devoted more attention to helping them to appreciate and build upon their strengths in order to lead more purposeful, resilient lives.

I was on the staff of McLean for 23 years, the last three of which were as Director of the Department of Psychology, a challenging, exciting, and demanding position. During my final two years I realized that the responsibilities and time attached to this role would not allow me to pursue newer professional goals and interests that had arisen, namely, conducting more seminars and workshops and doing more writing. I finally made the decision to leave McLean to engage in these other activities.

Upon announcing this decision, I was surprised that a number of people inquired if I was “retiring,” especially since I was in my early 50s at the time and retirement seemed in the distant future. Some wondered if I was giving up my career as a psychologist. One person asked, “What will you be doing with your time now that you’ll have so much time?”

I replied that I was not leaving my chosen profession, but rather entering a different phase of my career. I felt fortunate that I had other very exciting opportunities to pursue. I recognized that I could only venture into this newer phase because of all of the experiences and knowledge I had gained while on the staff of McLean. As one of my colleagues observed, “Your workshops and writings reflect all that you learned while in the ‘trenches.’”

Although I felt I was years away from retiring (my wife Marilyn feels I am still probably years away given how much I relish all that I continue to do professionally — she’s probably correct), I appreciate that departing from a particular job, especially in

middle age or one's senior years, plays out in many different ways. People may leave their jobs feeling it is their decision or they may feel the decision is being forced on them. Some harbor many reservations about leaving their positions while others eagerly count the days, months, or even years remaining until they can do so. Some don't really retire but engage in other work, whether full-time or part-time. Still others fill their so-called retirement years with a variety of activities: volunteering, attending classes geared for retirees, joining book clubs, playing bridge or golf, taking more trips, or spending more time with their family. I have heard many retirees assert that they are busier than ever.

The Importance of Choices

In general, the more we feel we have choices in the direction we take, the more comfortable and satisfied we are. If we believe we have little, if any, influence over our decisions and the path we follow in life, the less our sense of personal control and the greater the probability of feeling anxious and depressed. Personal control is associated with the sense that we are active participants in what transpires in our lives, which is a basic component of resilience.

I met a former business executive who was the limo driver taking me back to the airport after I gave a workshop. He told me he thought he would be happy when he retired, that he would no longer have a set schedule of meetings and other responsibilities. He laughingly said that he grew bored and his wife said he was grumpier than ever and he should find something to do. He told me a friend owned this limo service and he arranged to drive several days each week. "Driving a limo gives me a chance to get out, to feel I'm doing something, and I also meet some interesting people, including psychologists." As he uttered the word "psychologists" in reference to my profession, he chuckled and said, "And I'm having a good time. As long as I let the owner know a few days in advance when I'm available, I pretty much determine my own schedule of when to work."

A few months ago I spoke at a conference that had as a main theme the management of stress and the nurturance of resilience. The speaker before me examined the lives of people 65 years and older. During the question and answer period following his presentation, a woman in the audience commented that she had difficulty with the word "retiree." She said while she was not working any longer, she was certainly not

“retiring from life.” She added, “I’m actively involved with many activities. I think the word retiree or retirement implies that we are not doing much. We should find another word to describe this phase of our lives.” She received enthusiastic applause for this opinion from the almost 1,000 attendees in the room.

Shifting from Retiring to Refiring

I thought of this woman, the limo driver, and my own experiences upon leaving my position at McLean when I recently read an article in *USA Today* by Nanci Hellmich titled “Retiring? Book says it’s time to ‘Refire!’” The book to which Hellmich referred was *Refire! Don’t Retire: Make the Rest of your Life the Best of Your Life*, co-authored by Ken Blanchard and Morton Shaevitz. I gleaned the main points they advance from the newspaper article, and I just ordered the book to gain a more in-depth picture of their views. While their focus is on what might be considered our “senior” years, it seems that their ideas can be applied to our middle-age or even younger years since their definition of “refiring” is not exclusive to a particular age group.

Shaevitz notes, “Refiring is the opposite of retiring. Retiring is going from; refiring is going toward. People who are only leaving something don’t do very well. People who are going toward something do much better. When you refire, your focus is on healthy living, rewarding relationships, continued learning, vitality, meaningful involvement, and the development of a personal sense of spirituality. You refire the head, the heart, the body and the soul.”

Co-author Blanchard adds, “Refire is to see each day as an opportunity for adventure and learning. The point is life is a very special occasion. Don’t miss it. . . . Refiring is about changing your attitude and taking a few risks—anything from ordering something exotic on the menu to starting a new relationship. Play, love, laugh—be spontaneous.”

As I noted earlier, while the advice offered by Blanchard and Shaevitz is specifically geared for seniors, their suggestions for refiring are actually relevant at any age. Their recommendations for venturing out of one’s comfort zone resonated with those expressed by my colleague Sam Goldstein and me in our book *The Power of Resilience: Achieving Balance, Confidence, and Personal Strength in Your Life*; we advocate identifying and changing the negative scripts that burden us in life and learn to

appreciate that we are “the authors of our own lives,” that we can be proactive in writing and living newer, more satisfying scripts.

A Study of Retirees

In a companion article in *USA Today*, Hellmich reviewed a study of 1,000 60-73 year-olds who had retired within the past five years from their primary profession and had at least \$100,000 in investable assets. The study, which was commissioned by Ameriprise Financial Services, found that the emotional adjustments to retirement could be fraught with difficulties. Almost 70% reported that they faced challenges adapting to changes in their lives. The most difficult aspects of retirement included “missing the day-to-day social connections with colleagues (37%); getting used to a new and different routine (32%); and finding ways to give meaning and purpose in their days (22%).”

Yet these initial struggles did not predict ongoing problems. The study found that 65% of the retirees reported that they adjusted to their new lifestyle rather quickly with 97% saying they are “somewhat” or “very” satisfied with these changes. In attempting to find some meaning to their lives, 40% of the respondents noted that they are involved in volunteer activities.

Although for many of my readers retirement may seem far off in the future, I think we can benefit from the experiences and insights of individuals who are in that phase of their life, just as I have written about what we can learn from the reflections of centenarians (please see my March and April, 2013 website articles). Although I am not advocating we spend an unreasonable amount of time planning for our retirement years, whenever they may occur, I also believe that a practical level of planning adds to our sense of personal control and resilience and allows us to make informed decisions as we encounter various situations.

This view was echoed by Marcy Keckler, vice president of financial advice strategy at Ameriprise Financial, who was quoted by Hellmich. Keckler asserts that there were three main components of feeling more comfortable in retirement. The first is one that was emphasized above, namely, “being in control of your retirement decision.” The second and third factors follow from the first, namely, having “the right financial preparation” and “the right emotional and social preparation.” Keckler notes, “The people who have all of those are the most satisfied in their retirement.” However, we

must keep in mind that for preparation to be effective it requires adequate time prior to the major transitions in our lives.

To Follow Our Interests and Passions

We can never predict all that will occur in the future. Unforeseen emotional, physical, social, and financial challenges are typically the rule rather than the exception. However, even as these unexpected circumstances arise, our actions should be rooted in the belief that while we may not have control over many events that transpire during our lives, we have more control than we realize in terms of our attitude towards these events and how effectively we cope and manage them.

Preparation involves articulating our goals and expectations for both the short and long-term and being flexible in modifying these goals as our needs, interests, and passions change. Our interests and passions should always be taken into consideration. As I reflect upon my current pursuits, I am aware of how much I enjoy the challenges of writing and lecturing and how much I value meeting people in my travels. I am fortunate that I am able to continue to engage in these activities, and I have no immediate plans to “retire” from these endeavors. For me they represent “refiring.” For others “refiring” is discovered in other kinds of activities, whether driving a limo, volunteering, exercising, playing bridge or golf, taking vacations, and/or spending time with one’s grandchildren.

I believe it is never too early (or might I add too late) to plan for and engage in refiring, to subscribe to Shaevitz’s prescription to “focus on healthy living, rewarding relationships, continued learning, vitality, meaningful involvement, and the development of a personal sense of spirituality.” The details of this prescription will vary from one person to the next, but a constant should be engagement in those activities that we choose that will bring joy, purpose, and meaning to our lives.

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