

What's Next? Life After Work

By Reg Lang
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Retirement is a major life transition. William Bridges, who has studied transitions extensively, identifies three stages: the ending, the new beginning, and a "neutral zone" which he calls "a nowhere between two somewheres." Bridges

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emphasizes the importance of making a good and clear ending. And before moving on, he advises: take time to fully experience the neutral zone with its confusion, sense of emptiness and loss; and create space for the inner reorientation necessary to come to grips with the new reality and regenerate one's creative energy. This is an important time to decide what you're going to do with, and how you want to be in, the rest of your life.

Pathways to Retirement for Academics

Three typical paths:

1. **Business as usual.** Giving up students and administration but retaining scholarly activity. Relates back to why you became a professor in the first place.

2. **Leisure.** Pursuing enjoyable activities such as hobbies, travel, play; perhaps some volunteer work. Can be combined with #1.
3. **A new life.** Making a fresh start; possibly relocating. Trying your hand at something different, building on an earlier neglected interest, responding to whatever calls you, developing your untapped potential.

Some Factors Affecting the Retirement Path

- **Obvious considerations:** money, health, spouse/partner, family obligations
- **Feelings about your work:** still love it vs. grown tired of it.
- **Readiness to retire:** how much advance preparation you've done. A lifetime of work does not necessarily prepare us for life without work. Learning how not to work can be a new and unfamiliar challenge.

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- **Attitude toward retiring:** uneasy and fearful, or eager anticipation. Anxiety can affect the degree of preparation; putting it off for fear of having nothing to do. Research has shown boredom to be the #1

reason for dissatisfaction with retirement. Also concerns about loss of work routine, challenge, social contact and stimulation and sense of purpose.

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A Few Surprises, and Experience to Share

Retirement is a personal thing. The following is based largely on my own experiences.

- **Crossing the threshold.** It was much more difficult than I expected. As a good planner I like to keep my options open but this decision was irreversible so it was a tough one.
- **Change in identity and status.** Most academics are fortunate to retain a title (professor emeritus, senior scholar) plus connections to their former workplace, and accompanying perks. But retirement also brings an implicit title – Formerly Important Person – and it inevitable involves a change in identity and status (including the not-so-positive "senior").
- **It may look different when you get there.** Things you think you'll want to do in retirement may take on a different importance when you actually

are retired. Part of my previous enjoyment of painting and gardening was in the break they gave from my work; with that work gone, these activities lost a lot of their allure.

- **All that unfinished business!** So much piled up over the years, waiting to get done “when I have the time.” Tyranny of the Small Stuff can be an escape from having to face determining what’s really important in this life stage.
- **Renegotiating relationships.** Retirement is likely to require a renegotiation with those you live with, especially if you are now to be together 24/7. Casey Stengel’s wife observed, “I married him for love but not for lunch.”
- **Work structures your life.** As academics we have more than the usual control over our work, which suits our desire for autonomy, so the additional

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freedom of retirement may be welcome. But few of us have lived without externally imposed structure for any length of time. It takes awhile to let it go or replace it with something else.

- **To continue working or not.** Many need the money or aren’t ready to forego working. Others look forward to never having to work again – or subsequently discover that they still want to.
- **But what’s “work”?** More than just a job or occupation; work seen as fundamental to human dignity, an expression of one’s inner being that satisfies basic needs for creativity and service. My employment at the university ended but my work goes on, except now defined by me; based on things I care deeply about and want to continue but in different forms (e.g., coaching clients for balance and fulfillment or in transition). This is one direction: to replace or deepen, in retirement, satisfactions we had in our working lives.
- **Some losses, some gains.** Losses: reduced income and benefits, status, responsible and satisfying work, opportunity to make a difference in students’ lives, occasional power along with the ability to generate change, collegiality and intellectual stimulus, regular contacts with people whose company I enjoyed. Gains: greater freedom and control over my life, much more time to call my own, seeing all those deductions disappear, reduced hidden costs such as commuting and clothes, various perks for seniors, people remarking that I look younger and more relaxed.
- **Two further discoveries.**
#1: Freed of the relentless pressures of teaching and other academic duties, I was finally being able to get into depth in scholarly areas that interest me.
#2: Teaching two courses soon

after retiring, I became aware of how part-time faculty are (or allow themselves to be) exploited. Lessons: be cautious and circumspect about taking on teaching and getting sucked into that Black Hole; and be aware of the opportunity cost, namely, time that could be devoted to things of greater importance.

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Planning for Life in Retirement

Often said: the key to retirement is planning, and the key to retirement planning is pre-retirement planning. Some of us are avid planners while others loathe planning. Or we mix the two positions; I did considerable planning prior to retirement but almost none for the transition and thereafter.

Planning is recognizing that you have choices and then creating the ones you’ll be making rather than letting them happen by default. Some people will prefer to just let it unfold. Fair enough; some aspects of retirement, such as the emotional and spiritual dimensions, can’t be planned for. Or you want to leave room for spontaneity, surprise and whatever

emerges. Still, it makes good sense to do some advance thinking, including and beyond financial considerations, especially if you have nothing in mind for retirement, feel uneasy about how your time will be spent, or hear the call to try something new.

Contrast *mindless* and mindful approaches to retirement. A mindless approach is outer-directed. It accepts others' definitions, stereotypes and negative images about aging and retirement (e.g., a time of decline and loss, downhill all the way) and brings a mindset that can actually produce the feared effects. A *mindful* approach is inner-directed. You frame retirement in your own way, as a new stage in this one precious life you have left to live.

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A few tips for taking a mindful approach to your retirement:

- Take advantage of the pre-retirement period to at least envision what you want your preferred retirement to be like. Don't leave it until after your farewell send-off. When you're in the neutral zone, a lot of other stuff is happening and you may be riding an emotional

roller-coaster that's not conducive to deep introspection.

- Identify things you *really* want to do (why, at this stage in life, do anything else?) and how you want to *be* when you retire.
- Explore, maybe test, a range of possibilities. Avoid putting all your retirement eggs in one basket lest it turn out to be not what you wanted after all; and look for ways to live a balanced life.
- Build and cultivate networks of people and information sources that may be able to help and support you when you retire.

Closer

Retirement is a state of mind. It's a marker in our lives but hardly the end of the road. *I am retired* isn't the same as *I have retired*. Yes we get older, no we don't have to stop developing. Like Leonardo da Vinci, still curious and still learning, right to the very end.²

Endnotes

¹ This is an abbreviated version of my presentation to a seminar for soon-to-retire faculty members in December 2003 at York University, sponsored by the York Retirement Planning Centre. Background notes can be found on the Centre's website: www.yorku.ca/retire (go to Retirement Planning Tools, then click on Article).

² According to Michael J. Gelb, *How To Think Like Leonardo da Vinci* (New York: Dell, 1998), 38, "Leonardo was observing and describing, in scientific detail, the nature of his illness and symptoms as he died in the arms of the French king."