

Preface

AS AN OCTOGENARIAN, I've known my share of struggles and yes, sometimes my joints ache. However, contrary to all expectations, I'm not seeking to regain my lost youth. Truth be told, this past year has been the greatest ever, and I'm eagerly anticipating the next decade of life.

It has not always been thus. Lest you think I was born with a silver spoon in my mouth or that I am one of those insufferably cheerful people, permit me to introduce myself.

I was born to humble shopkeepers of Jewish heritage in a small village in the Sudetenland, a German-speaking region that had become part of Czechoslovakia following the First World War. Our village fell to Hitler when I was still in diapers, and as a consequence, I have spent a lifetime with fear and negativity as my constant companions. We fled, then we fled again, until finally, by sheer fluke, we landed penniless on an Ontario farm so dilapidated that no Canadian would buy it. With the remaining ten dollars that now constituted their entire fortune, my parents bought a cow so sick that it was dead the next morning. They learned to treasure the half-rotted apples that a neighbor invited them to collect from under his tree. It was a steep learning curve, but somehow, they survived.

Our home on the farm was a gloomy place where a wood stove barely heated the kitchen, and conversation was minimal. Not only were my parents exhausted by unaccustomed farm work, they were haunted by thoughts of what was happening to brothers, sisters, and parents, all trapped in the Nazi net. Rumors of extermination camps circulated throughout the war years, and at our table, anxiety hovered like an unwanted guest at every meal.

Others may have happy memories of school. My memories are of peers who mocked my halting, accented English, and who made barfing noises whenever I opened my lunchbox. Not until I was in Grade 6 did I have a friend, an equally lonely girl whose parents were also refugees. High school was an absolute nightmare of conflicting social pressures and personal isolation. The parents of my classmates forbade their sons to date me and encouraged their daughters to join a sorority that excluded me because I was Jewish.

This was doubly hurtful because the only religious education I had received was at a nearby church where I collected pamphlets of a blond, blue-eyed Christ, and where I learned to sing "Jesus Loves Me."

Eventually, thanks to a four-year scholarship, I attended university, but it was hardly blue skies ahead for a woman in the pre-feminist era. Although I had been one of only two people at my university who passed the grueling foreign-service entry exam in 1957, a government official informed me that Canada had never trained a female diplomat and had no intention of taking on a twenty-year-old girl who would only get married and waste her training.

After more years of study and earning a PhD, I did indeed get married, but it was not all "happily ever after." Marriage included putting my husband through grad school, but because he never finished his dissertation, his options were limited. The resulting stress in addition to other factors led to divorce when my children were respectively three and four years old.

Now, as I watch increasing numbers of friends lose a spouse, I think back to those bitterly unhappy days when I felt like the lonely unicorn, standing off to the side as, two by two, every creature clambered aboard Noah's ark. Divorce at the time was still so shameful that it took my mother several years to accept what she and her friends labeled as my "failure as a woman." For a long time, I simply stayed at home rather than enter a roomful of couples. Recovery was not easy. Recovery is never easy, and yet, in time, small steps become possible.

Awareness of the possible has given rise to this book. If, despite a childhood in the shadow of the Holocaust, and if, despite a lifetime of experiencing myself as an outsider with little sense of self-worth, I have found cause to hold my head high and to face the future with optimism in my retirement years, there is reason for others to hope.

Age certainly brings its share of pain and physical trauma. I fully recall the acute pain as well as the depressive effect of hearing that I was suffering from “degenerative disc disease.” Still, after a bout of back surgery, I started going to the gym three times a week, activating sweat glands and stretching muscles I never knew existed. Now I see to what extent we owe it to ourselves to take good care of the body we have been given. It is only by doing so that we can maintain our strength to enjoy life while engaging in purposeful action.

Age also brings other losses, a reality from which there is no escape. Even the golden handshake is often accompanied by sadness at saying farewell to respected colleagues likely to soon forget their promises of staying in touch. Some who leave the workforce fear that retirement marks the beginning of a long slide into meaninglessness, unproductivity, and uselessness.

That has not been the case for most of my cohorts. We are a new generation, those of us who have had the good fortune not to be felled prematurely by accident or disease. Thanks to regular physical exercise, balanced nutrition, and the blind luck of good genes, for us, the years ahead multiply exponentially. Beyond that, medical progress holds the promise of time that once lay beyond everyone’s reach. Many of us will now spend fully one third of our life in retirement.

I retired over twenty years ago. To my great surprise, these years have been by far the richest and happiest of my life. They have provided me with the opportunity to grow and to do, to wonder and to appreciate, to see new horizons everywhere. Whatever my initial misgivings about retirement, I have experienced it as a step forward into the realm of new possibilities.

I am far from alone in experiencing retirement as a gift. Around me, I see other seniors who have discovered how richly rewarding every hour of every day can become. Some of that may stem from an end to the distractions and demands of our middle years. I enjoy my grandchildren in ways that were not possible when my own daughters were their age. Beyond that, however, there is a vibrancy and an excitement that animates many older adults. I hear it in the voices of my contemporaries as they describe what they have just seen or heard, and what they have recently read or done. Their joy often has little connection to the life of idle self-indulgence that they had expected to lead in retirement. More often than not, their excitement arises from the contribution that they are making in the present, or from the impact they hope to have upon the future. Far from thinking that their best years have passed, they see how vital it is to maximize each day while making a meaningful contribution to the world of tomorrow.

They are living proof that aging is accompanied by a powerful urge to make a difference. Regardless of how greatly seniors may treasure their trophies and career accomplishments, regardless of how much they love and value their offspring, the past is not enough. They have a vision of doing more. Here's how Theodore Roszack describes this new vision:

Boomers who will usher us into senior dominance are the best-educated, most socially conscientious, most politically savvy older generation the world has ever seen. ... Given sufficient awareness and inspiration, I believe that generation will want to do good things with the power that history has unexpectedly thrust upon it in its senior years.ⁱ

Maggie Kuhn, founder of the Grey Panthers, saw our situation thus:

We are the elders, the experienced ones, ... responsible for the survival of our society. We are not wrinkled babies, succumbing to trivial, purposeless waste of our years and out time. We are a new breed of old people.ⁱⁱ

Mark Nepo expresses a related thought:

The closer we get to light, the more fully we are lighted.
The closer we get to truth and beauty, the more truthful
and beautiful we become. In the same way, the closer we
get to that sacred meadow called death, the more and
more alive we grow.ⁱⁱⁱ

Many of the seniors in my world bear out that sense of being lighted from within. They do not allow lack of imagination to limit their reality. At some level, they recognize that the failure to imagine that which does not yet exist leads to a life remembered, instead of to a life centered upon today and tomorrow. These seniors are deeply engaged in a range of meaningful, future-oriented activities. As a result, they exude energy and a breadth of vision that often exceeds what was possible during their “working” years.

Some are avid supporters of the arts; others are endeavoring to protect the environment. Some are passionate advocates for the dispossessed; others fund-raise or contribute hands-on work to bolster human health and welfare. One friend regularly visits prison inmates, while another collects unsold bread to deliver to soup kitchens that remain an unfortunate necessity for the mentally ill and homeless of our city. A third friend raises thousands of dollars for an African foundation by selling the products of her creative hands at bazaars and over the internet. Even in their nineties, some friends are freely reaching out to do their share.

All such activities are clearly aimed at alleviating suffering and at somehow leaving this world in better shape as a result of our having existed. They are proof positive of a tendency that philosophers of science are now calling “our god capacity.”

Science is making possible our broadest understanding of good and evil: the good is actions and systems that further the survival and continuing evolution of intelligent life;

the bad is what threatens it. But defining the good doesn't necessarily make it happen; we all know that science has also enabled terrible things on enormous scales. We need our god-capacity to generate the spiritual power — the motivation, trust, and faith in each other — to bring good about.^{iv}

A number of scientists now claim that morality predates all current religions. They back up their claims with increasing evidence that morality is neither the product of parental teaching nor of formal education. They see the altruism so evident among seniors as a biological imperative not just for humans, but for all organisms. They claim that morality is part and parcel of our evolutionary inheritance, and that we would not have survived had cooperation and sharing not been built into our nature.^v Instead of seeing selfishness as central to human behavior, they insist that compassion is a “hardwired response that we fine-tune and elaborate on in the course of our lives.”^{vi}

The elders who cross my path point toward just such fine-tuning. They are flexing their empathy muscles and learning to recognize the inherent value of others. Of course, I must acknowledge that they are also a privileged group. They are not among the homeless, the poverty-stricken, the mentally ill, or the addicted. Instead, they have acquired skills that allow them to work actively toward bringing about a better world. The most frequent complaint I hear is that twenty-four hours are not nearly enough to accomplish all that needs to be done in a day. They are proof positive that aging is a time to soar on a current of hope in human goodness.



A few words of explanation.

1. Terminology:

Because there are no words free of individually or culturally assigned meaning, I have struggled to find suitable terminology for people

“of a certain age.” For anyone except a child to call someone “an old man” or “an old woman” is considered rude and offensive. To say that someone is “elderly” is gentler, but the word inevitably conjures up an image of frailty and weakness. Similarly, the word “senior” carries a whiff of British classism, inherited money, and masculine authority. It was primarily upper-class men who named their sons “William Johnson Jr.” and expected deference as “William Johnson Sr.”

I considered the word “oldster” because it reminds me of Nancy Drew’s blue roadster, the dream car imprinted upon my imagination by the first book I ever read. Because cars are things that travel along unexplored roads, they symbolize the very opposite of the inertia, passivity, and jaded lassitude that initially, I feared would be the inescapable post-retirement reality. Nancy Drew’s roadster appealed greatly because it was a convertible, open to the skies above, and open to the road ahead. Just the image I wanted as a symbol of life in the later years — a time to let the wind blow through our hair, clearing out the cobwebs and making room for new learning, awareness, and discovery. Alas, as the internet informs me, the word “oldster” is already fraught with attitude and with meanings quite unsuitable for my purposes.

That left me with the word “elder” which also carries varying connotations, especially when we look at cultures where it is inseparable from a degree of respect that is a far cry from the North-American norm. In Canada, the word “elder” has an especially strong link to Indigenous culture and, to me, using it merely to convey oldness carries a whiff of cultural appropriation. Besides, I think the word “elder,” even in English, conveys an element of wisdom that is markedly different from merely getting old. To my way of thinking, a broad range of people in every culture may have a few words of wisdom to offer, but age by itself is not enough. Age alone does not confer wisdom, and some old people never morph into elders.

The gap in our terminology became especially clear as I groped for a noun for the later stage of life. We speak of childhood, adulthood,

and then... we stumble, mumble, and verbally fumble about, not knowing how to label a major category. Somewhat reluctantly, then, I have accepted the need to speak of “elderhood,” of “elders,” and also to use the word “seniors.”

2. References:

No doubt, my frequent referencing of other authors will appear excessive to some readers. However, I felt it important to do as much research as possible on a topic so wide in its scope and so deep in its potential application. Besides, I do have an academic background, with the result that I have thoroughly enjoyed delving into the thoughts and discoveries of researchers from diverse fields of expertise. Wherever possible, I have tried to digest and to simplify their insights and conclusions for the reader, while still giving appropriate credit to those whose work has influenced my thinking.

3. Biographical elements:

I have woven many of my own thoughts and personal experiences into this book. In large measure, I have done so in response to others who have assured me that their concerns do not differ greatly from mine. It is not always easy to slip serious topics into casual conversation and, as a result, every senior at times feels disconnected and lonely. Over the last few years, it has helped me greatly to verbalize difficult questions connected to aging. In the process, I have discovered that I am far from alone in my doubts or in my growing certainties. I hope that by being honest about myself, I can help others to feel less isolated as they look to the future.

4. Activating and personalizing the possible:

Although this book is an outgrowth of my own life experience, the “Idea and Action” component is meant to trigger thoughts on activating your own untapped potential. The goal of my questions is to help you move toward a life that feels energizing and purposeful for you.

This goal may require spending more than just a few moments allowing your answers to surface. I suggest that you actually take pen and paper in hand, and that you return repeatedly to your answers, amending, altering, and even totally changing direction as your clarity evolves and takes shape.

For the final, “Deeper Still” section, I set aside my questions, having decided that thoughts connected to death and dying were simply too personal and too intrusive to impose upon a diverse group of intelligent readers. The chapters of that section are meant to move you to a deeper place of introspection, and to help you reach personal answers that bring you to a place of peace.

Despite so much that is difficult to articulate, I strongly believe that our society has not yet caught up with the new world of aging. As elders, we are members of a cohort that is rapidly moving toward a new horizon. Wrinkles do not render us brainless, nor do they strip us of the desire to matter. As we contemplate how best to live each day, we often search for a fresh perspective. I hope my words will provide such a perspective. Moreover, I hope my words will inspire you to think and act in ways that promote a sense of self-worth as you embark on the trip of a lifetime, the journey to elderhood.

5. Acknowledgments:

Sincere thanks to Pat Dobie whose editing skills and helpful suggestions turned a draft into a manuscript. Equally sincere thanks to Peter Colenbrander whose intelligent comments and critique compelled me to re-examine many assumptions, and to delve more deeply into the issues. I appreciate greatly the seasoned advice of Peter Milroy who helped me navigate the complexities of finding a publisher. I owe much to Rob West, to the artistic designers and to the tireless staff at New Society who transformed a manuscript into a print-worthy book.

Sincere thanks also to the many friends who helped make this book happen. Some of you lent a hand directly, but most of you inspired this book by your own trailblazing life as elders.

Above all, I extend deepest gratitude to my daughters Rima and Reda. They believed in me, and they refused to let my self-doubts interfere with the completion of *The Aging of Aquarius*.

Diving In

Stepping into the Void

The fear of death follows from the fear of life. A man who lives fully is prepared to die at any time.

— Mark Twain

GRAVESTONES HAVE ALWAYS FASCINATED ME. At home and abroad, I often find myself studying inscriptions and picturing the lives of those whose bones lie buried, and of the broken-hearted who stood at graveside while the coffin was lowered. Thus, on a lazy Sunday afternoon in a small town in Germany, I joined a group of locals who were touring a cemetery under the guidance of an enthusiastic taphophile. His knowledge of epitaphs and his appreciation of tombstone art brought forth unexpected secrets from the grave. He led an informative and utterly captivating tour.

As an outsider, I noticed immediately that almost invariably, carved in bold capital letters, German gravestones feature the occupation of the deceased.

Among the numerous inscriptions I noted was the term *Meister* (master), used to indicate craftsmanship and professional aptitude. Here lay not just an ordinary mechanic, but a *Mechanikermeister*. There lay not just a hairdresser, but a *Friseurmeisterin*, a skilled coiffeuse. One man's name was engraved as Johann Schmidt, Herr *Türmuhrenfabrikant*, and I chuckled to think of the English equivalent — John Smith, Mr. Manufacturer of Door Hinges.

Most women buried in cemeteries are remembered principally as spouses. Such was the lot of the *Garnisonsverwaltungsinspektorswitwe*,

widow of the inspector of garrison administration. Perhaps this was a step up from being *Spenglermeistersgattin*, wife of a master plumber, but these are hardly words to reflect female individuality or accomplishment.

To me, these gravestones stood as reminders not to judge individuals by their social position or profession, but rather by the acts through which they demonstrate their inner worth and set in motion their deepest values.

On one tombstone, I spotted the following inscription:

Keine Tat, Kein Wort, Kein Gedanke, Geht Verloren.
Alles Bleibt Und Trägt Früchte.

No act, no word, no thought is ever lost.
Everything endures and bears fruit.

I found it comforting to think that our every thought, word, and deed might live on after our death. However, when I asked our cemetery guide whether Germans see death as “The Great Equalizer,” he shook his head. He stated firmly that “a man’s [sic] achievements are his crowning glory,” and that “beyond work, life is over.”

I was reminded of the German cemetery when I recently heard a professor of botany referred to as “the world’s leading tomato expert.” Undoubtedly, there are farmers, producers, greengrocers, and consumers everywhere indebted to his research, but will Mr. Tomato go happily to his grave with this tribute carved upon his tombstone?

Not long ago, while describing a young couple to my daughter, I said: “You’d really like them because they both work at...” Instantly, she interrupted with a reminder that she does not choose her friends for their professional status. Her words filled me with shame as I remembered fighting with my own mother during my dating years. How I hated it when her first question always seemed to be *Wer ist er?* “Who is he?” meaning “What is his professional or economic status?” I thought she should first have asked *Wie ist er?* “How is he?” or “What is he like? What kind of person is he?”

Still, for many people, status and professional achievement have become inseparable from their identity. The link becomes especially apparent when we are on the cusp of retirement. As we look toward the future, it is only natural to ask “Who will I be when I am no longer doctor, lawyer, merchant, chief...? Why will I get up in the morning when work no longer shapes my life? What will I do with myself all day?”

Ironically, keeping busy is not the problem.

A plethora of choices awaits every retiree. Any middle-class home has endless projects capable of soaking up time and attention. There are belongings and papers that need sorting and disposal, especially if downsizing looms on the horizon. There are gardens and garages that have been neglected, as well as kitchens, bathrooms, and furnishings that have not been upgraded. All too often, however, such projects only remind us of all the material possessions we have amassed, none of which brought the satisfaction promised by their advertisers.

Or we can stay busy “having fun.” Many seniors now carry devices that allow instant access to their poison or passion of choice. For some, it is the latest news, stock report, or sports score. For others, it is food, fashion, or the lives of the rich and famous. Still others prefer games like bridge, poker, scrabble, solitaire, or one of a host of interactive, virtual reality activities. Just a few clicks and you are in the game, alone or with players who may be on the other side of the globe. And if you live in a city, you can experience your fun as spectator or participant at any number of venues.

Finding activities that bring a measure of inner satisfaction can be a far greater challenge. This is the key reason so many people express dread as the magic moment of retirement approaches. Suddenly, a deep fear replaces the dreams of leisure they harbored through every work-related setback. Moreover, it is natural sometimes to forget that images of “the good life” have been shaped by skillful promoters and effective advertising: “Relax with drink in hand under a palm tree, or perhaps on a deck chair aboard a cruise ship.” And yet, those

who have had such opportunities have often found boredom quickly setting in. For a while, that restlessness may vanish in a book or in another sleep-inducing drink, but sooner rather than later, people start searching for something to do or somewhere to go.

Nietzsche had already figured this out in 1886, at least as it concerned those of British stock:

Industrious races find it a great hardship to be idle: it was a master stroke of ENGLISH instinct to hallow and begloom Sunday to such an extent that the Englishman unconsciously hankers for his week — and work-day — again.¹

However, an ocean of difference separates “keeping busy” from feeling useful. For most of our adult lives, our work, along with family responsibilities, our work has defined us and given us a sense of coherence. When we teeter on the cusp of retirement, we know who we are within our professional world. Except for the increasingly rare, lifelong stay-at-home mom, work is in large measure the outward expression of our inner being.

As Ray Robertson points out, few things in life match the satisfaction of meaningful work:

If one is fortunate enough to find one’s occupational calling, there is a satisfaction ... so profound that it can’t be achieved in any other fashion — or none that I’ve ever known. When I’m working — deeply, single-mindedly working — the only word that approximates the experience is absorbed.²

Few who have found this ideal marriage of inner qualities and external opportunities actively embrace retirement. For such people, retirement is a major transition that constitutes an existential turning point.

Nonetheless, the transition can and should be made. Failing to do so means failing to activate all that lies dormant within us. It also

means we will reach the end of our days without having asked a key question, one that will allow us to die without regret: How will I make my life meaningful as I move from the known into the void?

The answers to such questions are as unique as the circumstances of every life. Sometimes, those circumstances are difficult indeed. A marriage may have broken down. A loved one may have died prematurely. The unthinkable may have come to pass.

Even for the more fortunate retiree, the answer to “Now what?” may require leaving his/her comfort zone. This inevitable reality was corroborated by the work of a team of university researchers led by A. Leung. They tested people by giving them problems to solve while seated inside a very large box. Identical problems were given to a control group who were not placed in a box. Thinking outside the box led to far greater creativity of thought.³

To step outside one’s habitual box can be disorienting. It can feel like the whiteout that skiers experience when snow falls so heavily that perspective vanishes. This leaves them with no signposts to distinguish up from down. Their total confusion is similar to the panic experienced by new retirees who see only a dizzying array of choices ahead.

Psychotherapist Thomas Moore likens the process of finding purposeful activity to alchemy, a process that can only occur if we first take stock of all our failures and disappointments and painful memories. At the same time, Moore counsels that we are never too old to do something we might consider irrational. His own father began piano lessons at age ninety-four.⁴

We are all the sum total of our experiences, good and bad. Unless we are honest about who we are and how we got here, we are likely to stay stuck in the past.

The answer to “Now What?” may take a singular form, when we find an aspect of our being that has lain dormant for years. Or it may be multifaceted, as we discover within ourselves an entire bucketful of undeveloped talents. The bottom line, however, is that we feel

most fulfilled when we stretch to accomplish something or to meet a challenge. A life free from all struggle is not the recipe for happiness promised by amusing “Happy Retirement” greeting cards.

Alas, there is no one-size-fits-all answer to “Now What?” Figuring out what to do with the rest of your life (in all probability, at least a third of your days will be spent post-retirement) takes time. David Niven hits the nail on the head in his creatively entitled book *It’s Not About the Shark: How to Solve Unsolvable Problems*:

Your best answer is not a pizza. It is not going to be delivered within thirty minutes. But it will come. And when it does, it will be ... even better than pizza.⁵

As a starting point, Niven suggests two approaches:

1. **Fail with joy.** Try something that probably won’t work and something that definitely won’t work. We want to be right so much that we desperately try to avoid failure, but there’s learning to be had in failing.
2. **Do something out of order.** Mix up your routine. It can be as minor as putting your sandwich together backwards — put the jelly on first today and then the peanut butter. When researchers had people do mundane things out of order, there was an 18 percent jump in cognitive flexibility scores.⁶

Retirement can be frightening, or it can be an exhilarating prospect. We can choose to avoid whatever frightens us, or we can dive deeply in search of greater fulfillment. Harold Kushner expressed it thus:

I am convinced that it is not the fear of death, of our lives ending, that haunts our sleep so much as the fear that our lives will not have mattered, that as far as the world is concerned, we might as well never have lived. What we

miss in our lives, no matter how much we have, is that sense of meaning.⁷

In Germany, those historical gravestones I visited bore professional titles as the apex of human achievement. To the modern observer, a cloud of sadness clings to these testimonials. They speak of lives circumscribed by employment. They may be etched in stone, but they are a denial of our current reality. For increasing numbers of elders in the twenty-first century, the post-retirement years are the most interesting, the most productive, and often the most meaningful years that we will spend on this earth.



IDEA:

You are facing a move from work to a retirement-based life and identity.

For many people, status and professional achievement are inseparable from their identity. This link becomes especially apparent when we stand on the brink of retirement. We have spent years taking pride in our accomplishments. Just when we thought it would be time to rest, complicated questions rise to the surface. *What is the meaning of life? Of my life in particular? Haven't I done enough?* It all feels overwhelming.

Now what? is always the first question to demand answers.

ACTION:

1. Believe in yourself. You are much more than the profession or the accomplishments that constitute your past. Like diamonds, we all have facets that remained unpolished as we tended to the necessities of life.
2. Spend time getting to know yourself. Was your pre-retirement identity based on your profession? Your

family responsibilities? Your creativity? Your willingness to take risks? Your determination to overcome obstacles? Other roles, values, or traits? Can you think of ways in which you received positive attention for that identity?

3. Picture yourself at a social gathering where you know very few people. Imagine introducing yourself to others without talking about your pre-retirement identity. List all your interests, from apple-growing to zookeeping. What lies just beyond the specific interest? Do you want to grow apples in a flourishing garden that is your vision of Eden, or are you passionate about preserving old varieties and wild fruit trees? Which aspects of yourself would you like a new acquaintance to recognize? What will be your new points of connection to others?

4. Write down what excites you.

Two things I want to do before I die _____

Two things I want to do this year _____

Two things I want to do this month _____

Two things I plan to do this week _____

Two things I plan to do today for myself, my family, or for my friends _____

One thing I plan to do today for my broader community, or for the world _____.

Facing Emptiness

In all our searching, the only thing we've found that makes the emptiness bearable is each other.

— Carl Sagan

WELL BEFORE THE ENLIGHTENMENT and the Age of Reason, the renowned mathematician Blaise Pascal pointed out that humans suffer greatly from a sense of inner emptiness.

Nothing is as intolerable for people than being in a state of complete rest, without passions, without occupation, without diversion, without effort. That is when they feel their nullity, their inner loneliness, their inadequacy, their state of dependency, powerlessness, and emptiness.⁸

Many people compensate by keeping busy. During our working years, and especially if we are simultaneously raising a family, this is rarely a problem. When we become empty nesters, and in particular when we retire, Pascal's sense of inner emptiness hits us hard. Psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi writes that "most people who work experience a more enjoyable state of mind on the job than at home ... Yet few people would willingly work more and have less free, leisure time."⁹

At a recent dinner party where few of the grey-haired guests knew one another, the hostess suggested that we introduce ourselves by speaking first of our pre-retirement work and then of what we would have done had circumstances been different. I could not help noticing

that the men who had risen to the top of their professions spoke with pride of their achievements and expressed no desire to change anything.

Almost all the women, however, had dreamt of making a larger impact than had heretofore been possible. Some had already made an important contribution both on the home front and in the wider world, yet they clearly yearned to develop skills that still lay dormant after a lifetime of endeavor. In part, this may be laid at the feet of parents who favored sons over daughters. In part, it may also be the fault of teachers who steered girls into coursework and careers that stretched neither mind nor imagination. I recall my own recoil when presented with the “opportunity” to learn shorthand and typing. Even then, I was appalled at the prospect of a lifetime spent copying down and neatly reproducing on paper the spoken words of a male superior.

I suspect that Csikszentmihalyi’s contention that “few people would willingly work more and have less free, leisure time” derives its logic (in part) from its assumption of ingrained class-based thinking that construes work as an activity to be avoided. Despite not having been born “upper crust,” we attach a measure of negativity to the very word “work.” We may well admire ancestors for their struggles, but we feel entitled not to wear our fingers to the bone. We even label certain kinds of work “menial,” and wherever possible, we delegate such tasks to new immigrants. We also distinguish between those who labor and those who “have” careers or professions, a parallel to “having” possessions and riches.

According to Csikszentmihalyi, there is an evolutionary explanation for our ambivalence about work. “If we could be contented just sitting by ourselves and thinking pleasant thoughts, who would be out chasing the saber-toothed tiger?”¹⁰

At every age, we need to be engaged. Life seems most worth living when we are deeply involved in activities that both absorb us and reward us with a sense of meaning. A close friend blossomed after retirement. Almost instantly, she volunteered with two organizations

that required longer hours of service than her years of paid employment. Yet despite the long hours, she thrived. She worked gladly because it made her feel good about herself.

Passive entertainment often absorbs us, but only through our personal contribution do we glimpse a sense of meaning. I say “glimpse” in homage to scientists and researchers who study everything from black holes to cancer and may never discover The Answer. Still, they strive, and sometimes, ever so slowly, they move knowledge forward. It is the same for those who fight poverty or injustice in its myriad forms. No individual is likely to solve all these problems alone, yet by working collectively, people do move things forward — even if only a millimeter at a time.

As we move into the retirement years, the “wisdom years” that stretch ahead, it seems increasingly unsatisfying and even distasteful to be seeking little more than our own comfort and amusement. In an idle moment, I once penned this ditty:

There once was a woman who'd worn many shoes
She'd raised quite a flock, and at work she'd paid dues,
She rewarded herself with cosmetics and clothes
Her dreams having shrunk to the tip of her nose.

The great gift of life she blew at the end
Ignoring wide paths that lay 'round the bend.
Not past it we stand, nor over the hill
But itching to see what waits for us still.

To reach and extend is everyone's need
To quit without trying, to sadness will lead.
So into the void let's leap once again
It's not time to stop at three score and ten.

We may momentarily feel great posting photos of ourselves in some exotic setting, but successful retirement is a major transition. It requires that we plan for more than those moments of exceptional pleasure. Having conducted studies of various cultures and worked

with thousands of individuals, George and Sedena Cappannelli stress the need to transition inwardly in retirement:

The first part of our journey is primarily outward bound. We move away from the womb and in search of our place and stance in the world The second half of life is about ... focusing on a different set of values. It is about turning inward It is about making peace with the Earth, making sense of our time here, our role, the legacy we will leave behind us.¹¹

Not long ago, I visited a friend who was nearing death. For days, I had agonized over what to say. Finally, I simply blurted out my admiration for all that she had done. Despite her outward control, this made her tears flow. Almost her very last words to me were “Thank you, Helen, for assuring me that I have not frittered away my days, and that my life has been meaningful.”

Her final words confirmed social philosopher Michael Gurian’s claim that “to serve is our life-work even in our last days,” that “there is no time in our lives when service is secondary,” and that “feelings of taking ultimately do not complete us.”¹²

We may not have the power to control the future, but as elders we can lead the way. We can envision ways to contribute to the well-being of our fellow creatures. We can be responsible to ourselves and to the universe by interspersing our occasional escapism with outreach that leads to new horizons and to broader perspectives.

As elders, we know that we will be measured not by what we took in this life, but what we gave. That is the legacy we secretly hope to leave behind. And yet, blinded by fears and insecurities, we sometimes reach only into the past rather than step into the unknown. Fear leads us to slam shut the door to our own possibilities.

Afraid of the anxiety that attends self-knowledge, afraid of the possible demands of authentic life, we run away,

hiding in false selves, or smaller selves, avoiding the challenge of our true self. Like blind tightrope walkers, we hesitate to move into the unknown. We hold on to whatever is within grasp: a handle, a straw, a house, a marriage, an idea, an identity, a belief, a piece of chocolate.¹³

As we transition into retirement, it may be tempting to clutch at straws and to crawl away into our own past. However, the path toward an authentic life requires us to stop seeing change as a dreaded specter. Instead, we must welcome change as the doorway to challenge and to transformation. Only by embracing the ever-evolving future can we deepen our experience of the present moment while expanding our awareness of all that connects us to life.



IDEA:

Many of us feel a sense of inner emptiness. When we fail to acknowledge the hole within us, we end up trying to fill it with all the wrong things. These include excess possessions, a constant busyness, and distractions of all sorts. None of these solve the problem. That inner emptiness revolves around a deep-seated human need to make our one, precious life meaningful.

ACTION:

1. Have you ever wondered why people feel the need to talk about how busy they are? Do you find yourself doing this? What is this about? Why do you feel the need to do this?
2. Go for a walk — or just sit quietly for a while, with no reading material or other distraction. No music, no radio, no TV or electronic device. Listen only to your thoughts. Write them down.

3. Take another look at the quote in this chapter from Gunn's *Journeys into Emptiness*. Linger, and let his words speak to you.

Afraid of the anxiety that attends self-knowledge, afraid of the possible demands of authentic life, we run away, hiding in false selves, or smaller selves, avoiding the challenge of our true self. Like blind tightrope walkers, we hesitate to move into the unknown. We hold on to whatever is within grasp: a handle, a straw, a house, a marriage, an idea, an identity, a belief, a piece of chocolate.¹⁴

4. Have you been hiding in a false self? Write down the names of any voices from the past (or in the present) that are making you feel small, unworthy, and incapable of further growth.