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GETTING OLD IS A FULL TIME JOB

Moving On From A Life Of Working Hard

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Introduction

Each of us approaches the idea of retirement with our own fears, fantasies and hopes. And while we are changing personally, the world is changing as well. Mary Catherine Bateson, in her thoughtful book, *Composing a Further Life* observes:

We have not added decades to life expectancy by simply extending old age; instead, we have opened up a new space partway through the life course, a second and different kind of adulthood that precedes old age, and as a result every stage of life is undergoing change.¹

This leaves us without good role models for 21st Century retirement.

There are stories of exceptional people who surprised us with their late life productivity. There are more stories of those who dwindled or atrophied, physically, mentally or both. Because our parents' generation did not have the same rules, opportunities or expectations as our generation, their lessons, their learned wisdom, often leave us with insufficiencies. Those a decade or two ahead of us may guide us, but there is not a coherent story yet that they provide, a myth if you will. By myth, I mean the stories that aggregate from the culture around us, rise above the
personal to the cultural, and then shape our thinking and give energy to our actions.

When I tell people I am retired, they are quick to remind me of all the things I am doing and reassure me that I hardly seem retired, as if retirement were an undesirable state. But I am, indeed, retired—not from activity or productivity or engagement but from focusing my life externally. I have ceased to feel responsible for demands I have not chosen. I have given up being motivated by rewards that drove me in earlier decades. I am in a new developmental stage, something between middle age and old age that has not been recognized in the development life cycle charts because it is new in the last fifty years.

It is the work of our generation—and by that I loosely mean men and women who, now, in 2012 are between 50 and 75, to create a new retirement myth that reflects all the opportunities and energies available to us without pushing into the shadow the realities of aging. I hope this work helps to shape a vision of what life can be for those of us fortunate enough to have time and space to explore that which we neglected in the hurly burly of our earlier years.

Certainly, the book need not be read from start to finish. Think of it as a cookbook and read what seems right for the moment.
THE COSTS OF WORK

I am sitting at the breakfast table. It is 10 a.m. My second cup of tea is cold, and I am still working my way through the day’s New York Times. Few things make me happier than drinking tea in my sunny kitchen while moving through the Times without interruption. But instead of feeling unconditionally happy, I’m having tinges of guilt. A small voice inside is murmuring: What kind of sloth is still in her robe at ten on a weekday, having accomplished nothing more than witnessing from afar the world’s crazinesses? Lazy me, I don’t even do the crossword puzzle.

I have had many mornings like this since I retired, delicious mornings in which I was not at the gym at six, not dressed in heels and ready to walk out the door at 7:00, not on my email or telephone, not making the world a better place before noon. And I have spoiled many of those mornings by intruding guilt tapes in the
background: “Lieberman, you are being so lazy. Where is your productivity, you sloth? Get up and DO something.”

For years, my puritan work ethic, even without a drop of puritan blood, served me well. The ways I assessed opportunity, measured success, and evaluated my behaviors were useful, productive and rewarding for five decades. Now I have left that phase of my work life and moved into a different kind of life, but you can see that I forgot to retire my old self-assessments as well. It took me a long time to understand something very simple. If I want a new kind of life—and I do—then I need to give up judging my actions with that old school ruler—because where it leads me is to the same life I decided to leave behind.

It is trite to say change is hard—but trite catches truth. So: Change Is Hard! Going from a highly structured, ordered life to something else, not yet well defined, is jolting. There is ample advice in the aging literature that says work as long as you can to stay young and vital. By all means, keep working as you have been if the work is satisfying and you can do it and you want to do it. But after decades of hard work, we may want a change, even if it scares us. In some instances, the work is killing our souls. In other instances, it is killing our bodies. Sometimes, it is a one-two punch. Other times, we don’t give up on the work but the work gives up on us, and we are forced to stop or at least re-group before we are ready.

So here is the message of this book: When we retire, or, maybe, keep working but downgrade the importance of that work in our lives, we need to retire the template for success we used in our building middle years. We need a new template for success. If
we keep using our old measure of success in our new lives, we set ourselves up for frustration, disappointment and unhappiness.

No matter how we approach retirement, it is likely that we will wonder what we are going to lose when we stop working. From scores of conversations, it is clear that we worry about:

- Structure
- Social network
- Sense of importance
- Status
- Money and benefits
- Meaningful activity
- New challenges

These are valid concerns, but there is a different question we should also ask:

What did working cost me;
what have I had to give up for working?

I loved my busy work life and it gave me many gifts, but it had costs. I wasn't always the kind of friend I like to be. And I didn't always speak as authentically as I yearned to do. I neglected my body, played too little, daydreamed rarely and felt busy-busy-busy all the time. I don't regret those years. In fact, I am grateful for them, but now is a different time.

I have walked away from mainstream work, which is how I think of my "old" life. I am learning to assess what I do in different way. Here are my new criteria for success:
• Is it interesting?
• Does it give me a sense of satisfaction?
• Do I learn from the work?
• Am I working on my own schedule?
• Do I feel I'm growing from the work?
• Does the work provide opportunities for good interactions?

If I can answer YES to all of these questions, whatever I am doing, I am hugely successful. So, then, the challenge is to figure out what will get us to our own YES. In thinking about this, I see twelve tasks or jobs that deserve our attention in this new phase of our lives. Really, I think they are all related, maybe part of one grand bit of work called FINALLYGROWINGINTOURBESTSELF. But I'm going to describe them as different jobs from which you can pick and choose. The first job, the one we are discussing here, is Strategist. That means, of course, figuring out how we want to move forward in this new country of retirement.

In talking about this new terrain, I use what many consider a dirty word: OLD. “People don’t want to be old,” my friend Irene declared, “and you can’t use it in a book title. Write about how to stay young.” But either we are getting older or we are dead. Really, it just is what it is, and we can declare that 70 is the new 50—but it isn’t. Our 70 may be easier and healthier than our parent or grandparent, but we are still engaged in the aging process. And, yes, aging often brings diminishments. All of us hope they come later, much later or, best of all, they skip us completely. But in our fear of what we will lose, we are at risk for missing
what we can gain. Aging also brings opportunity. In 1961, Rabbi Abraham Heschel spoke at the President’s Council on Aging with words equally relevant half a century later:

The years of old age may enable us to attain the high values we failed to sense, the insights we have missed, the wisdom we ignored. They are indeed formative years, rich in possibilities, to unlearn the follies of a lifetime, to see through inbred self-deceptions, to deepen understanding and compassion, to widen the horizon of honesty, to refine the sense of fairness.¹

Heschel offers a challenge as demanding as the most provocative work assignments: “To attain a sense of significant being we must learn to be involved in thoughts that are ahead of what we already comprehend, to be involved in deeds that will generate higher motivations.”

Even as we recognize that we age, retirement also offers us the chance to reclaim some of the freedoms of being young without the constraints of youth. That enormous learning we had as kids is waiting for us again. The healthy self-centeredness that is childhood can once more be tasted. Remember the delight of trying something for the fun of it without being graded or judged? We can be sad and, five minutes later, laugh until we hurt. We can dare and risk and fall flat on our metaphorical behinds and just get up.

It’s, well it’s grown up to move from childhood and adolescence into responsible adulthood. What’s cute at six is not so cute at 16 and completely without charm at 36. So this is not about being 16 again. This is about reconnecting with the pleasures of childhood that make sense in a mature
adult who is ready not to leave responsible adulthood behind but to go FORWARD and keep the best of those years while moving into something else that makes great sense for the next stage.

Once we give up full-time, “grown up” work, we get to engage in activities that seem to me to be really, truly grown up. And, while we are doing this work, we are the CEO, the COO, the HR Director and the snack bar attendant. We are the vendor and the customer, the sales department and the quality assurance team. Listen, this isn’t so easy …that’s a lot of roles to take on, but if the whole team is aligned in the service of us, well it can be much more fun than what we did before when complete agreement among all the stakeholders may never have happened.

For most of us, when we were deep into our careers, developing a strategy meant being pretty sure it was going to work, convincing others of its merit and working like hell to pull it off. Now developing a strategy means saying, “Here is where I am headed this week.” If you want to develop a new strategy next week or next year, go ahead. What matters is what you do today and why you are doing it. That’s it. No performance appraisal.
When we were kids, we frequently told stories and then watched to see how well they worked. If they didn't work, we might just make up a different story. As time went on, we got more committed to one particular version of a story and then it became, "That's my story and I'm sticking to it!" But now, it's a good idea to pull out those stories, spill them onto the kitchen table and look more carefully. Maybe it is time to edit this story, add something to that and completely replace another with a story that captures what happened in a better way.

One story we need to be careful about is our success story. I, for example, have had a pretty good life. I need to be careful how much of this success I attribute to my husband's and my outstanding characters. Didn't we work hard, think clearly and play by the rules in order to arrive at the finish line? Sure, we did, but we know lots of people who also worked hard and played by whatever rules seemed to be the right ones and were beaten up. They lost their jobs through no fault of their own; they lost spouses,
children, houses, health, money and/or friends—and these catastrophes could have happened to us as well.

So much of what happens flows from our parents, the culture, the years in which we lived, the places we worked and people for whom we worked, the gift of health for our family, the random luck that let us dodge accidents and other unanticipated difficulties. Writing about his book *Outliers*, Malcolm Gladwell suggests that more good fortune may be attributed to circumstances beyond our control than we suspect.

...I do think that we vastly underestimate the extent to which success happens because of things the individual has nothing to do with. *Outliers* opens, for example, by examining why a hugely disproportionate number of professional hockey and soccer players are born in January, February and March. I'm not going to spoil things for you by giving you the answer. But the point is that very best hockey players are people who are talented and work hard but who also benefit from the weird and largely unexamined and peculiar ways in which their world is organized.

One of the big jobs of aging is to work hard on not imputing more to our good fortune or misfortune than is merited. Now, in this new stage of life, we are all beginners again. We can correct our delusions, archive our regrets, get a handle on those internalized messages from childhood that went unacknowledged but were powerful and edit them if we wish. We can do a better job of understanding the stories of the past, and in doing so, we get to write a future that is waiting to be told.

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Most of us will have little desire to revisit our childhood, look for old recriminations or hold our parents responsible for our adult choices. But we needn’t go back. It turns out the past is right here, right now.

Just as there is a progressive energy at work within us, so there is a very conservative power that seeks to limit growth by limiting vulnerability. As all growth requires facing what we fear, we naturally learn patterns that protect against the fear.”

It can feel safe to say we aren’t afraid, but it is seldom the whole truth. In this stage of our lives, when people of courage dare to speak intimately, we might hear:

- I fear being irrelevant.
- I fear loneliness.
- I fear facing all I didn’t do.
- I fear my partner and I will never really find our way back to intimacy.
- I fear I failed as a parent.
- I fear the loss of potency.
- I fear finding out I’m not as together as I want to be.
- I fear others will know I’m a fraud, a failure or a fake.

Have we let these thoughts into our script? Did the stories get shaped by what we needed to forget as much as what we wanted to remember? And, in contrast, are there joys and gratitudes we forgot to edit in? Were there wonderful moments of love and lust, laughter and learning we lost touch with along the way?
A long life is, in fact, a very complicated script. “Making a living,” suggests Jungian analyst James Hollis, “is the easy part, but far more critical is what liberates us from the limits of family and cultural history.” I know that making a living didn’t always feel so easy for many of us, but understanding how the stories we presented to ourselves as well as others helped or hindered that task is really tough work. In *Raising Lazarus*, an unusual collaboration between Blair Justice, a physiobiologist and clinician turned academic dean and Pittman McGehee, an Episcopal Dean turned therapist, Justice describes how McGehee helped him out of numbing despair. Justice writes:

> When we become too much of something we are not meant to be, we are asking for trouble. Imbalance or disharmony may occur when we seek to satisfy the need to control at the expense of the need to connect...A common error is to try to use achievement as a way to attract attention and be loved. But the Self, which is our soul and essence, permits no substitution or cheating.⁴

When we have a change of mind, Dr. Justice, both the scientist and the patient, tells us, “...we have a change of brain. When we gain meaning, we mold matter.”

Here are examples:

- A man left home as a teenager, a disorganized, unsupportive home, and he didn’t look back. He got himself to college and built a successful life, but he carried a strong sense of guilt about abandoning others. Only with the help of counseling could he forgive that young man for focusing so intently on his own survival

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and see how it contributed to his being a good husband and father. Yes, he would do it differently with the wisdom of middle age, but he didn’t have that wisdom at 17. He did have the courage and drive to make a life, and he needs to put into his story the credit he deserves without taking away the difficult parts.

- A woman in her sixties had an abortion in her twenties, and she was left with a pervasive shame. It took a great deal of thought to reconsider what happened, to decide that maybe being sexually awakened at 23 wasn’t evil and that not bringing a child in the world she could neither give up nor support was, for her, an act of bravery.

- An FBI agent remembered always loving art, but her mother convinced her it wasn’t really a career. It wasn’t until she found herself distracted from a dangerous stakeout one day by the patterns of the broken glass on the empty lot in which she was sitting that her lost connection to art hit her so hard she could barely refocus her attention on the criminal at hand. She decided to add another act to her script, one in which she resigned from the FBI and became a full-time artist.

- A man lost his beloved father when he was seven. His mother had to go to work, and he felt he lost his mother as well. While highly successful in his work life, he was cold and distant with his wife and children and with associates. Only in his fifties was he able to understand that a deeply embedded fear of loss kept him from forming close connections all his adult life and stood in the way of feeling happy. His script was written by a seven year old who lived on in an unhappy adult.
How do we edit our scripts? First, we LISTEN. We listen to the parts of our self that we may have ignored, and we listen to those who know of us well and tell us things that irk us. When our children repeatedly tell us, “You are controlling,” we have to hear them. We have to ask ourselves, “What is this about?”

When a good friend tells us, “You are being righteous,” we can’t get more righteous and outline all our friend’s faults. We have to ask: What would make me righteous? What kind of behaviors would give that impression? Is there something hiding behind this behavior?

Although they sound simple, these questions are hard to ask of oneself. So easy, at 60 or 70 to say, “I am what I am; take me or leave me.” Yes, we are what we are. And we are MORE. We can’t stop being who we are. We can start being more than we have been.

To those readers who are not inclined to this kind of talk, this may sound like psycho-babble, so let me try an analogy. I am not (yet) gifted artistically. Give me a large hunk of clay, and I might do a crude bowl or a misshapen figure, but it is unlikely to appear aesthetically pleasing to others. Let a sculptor take my lump of clay and shortly, something more beautiful, more interesting, more complete will appear. That something was in the clay all along, even if I couldn’t make it appear. It is true that there was also something in the sculptor—training, experience, vision—but the possibility of what appeared was always available.

The point: now, as we move towards growing old, we have the time and the depth of experience to explore our own clay to see what could be more interesting, more beautiful, more
moving. Working with a skilled therapist can help, but this is not a choice we all can or wish to make. But there are books and classes and conversations waiting for us everywhere. Some find keeping a journal is helpful. Some swear by meditation. Others find solace in spending time alone in nature or going on silent retreats. Many find a path through religion. I have long talks with myself in the shower and longer lunches with friends who are wise and kind and candid. Most of all, find others who see the value of being a script editor and are taking on this work. Hang out with them.

Progress is not assured, but we need not be in a hurry. How many television programs fail each year? Perhaps there is a short pilot series and then a show is gone. Sometimes the reviewers praise a show and it still doesn’t catch on or, in reverse, the reviewers are scornful and the viewers still come. It’s a risk. Developing any new program is a risk. It is not only a risk in Hollywood. It is a risk in our living rooms. Try one pilot and if it doesn’t take, try another.

*What we try is the less important part of our story. How we think about what we try is central to our retirement.* Before we leap to action, to that siren call of busy, we might take time to meander back through our lives to discover what interests, what yearnings, what curiosities we pushed aside and why we allowed them to stay hidden. If, just if, heart could trump mind, what might we be doing? If we hadn’t led the life we led, if we had to write a substitute script, what would we write?
USING THE RED PEN

Having more time opens up the opportunity to revisit earlier interests and see what more we can bring to them with new insight. In her thirties, a friend started writing a memoir of her family. Her life got in the way and her documents were put in a drawer for more than two decades. After leaving a consuming job, she brought the memoir out of the drawer and back into focus.

Oh my heavens, I was stunned to find I was seeing my family in very different ways. What I wrote about my parents' marriage didn't seem true at all any more. What I wrote about my siblings felt naïve and incomplete. So much of what I had written needed amplification. At the same time, I found myself back in touch with some strong positive emotions about family that had become strained over the years, and I was glad to have them recalled.

An engineer retired in his sixties. The death of a child shocked him into writing poetry, something that held no interest previously. "Now, I write every day. I read poetry and about poetry. I'm not a very good poet yet, but I have found poetry to be incredibly good for me."

Carl Jung wrote his first famous book, *Symbols of Transformation* in 1912. In revising the book decades later, he writes in the foreword:

I have long been conscious of the fact that this book, which was written thirty-seven years ago, stood in urgent need of revision, but my professional obligations
and my scientific work never left me sufficient leisure to settle down in comfort to this unpleasant and difficult task. Old age and illness released me at the last from my professional duties and gave me the necessary time to contemplate the sins of my youth. I have never felt happy about this book, much less satisfied with it; it was written at top speed amid the rush of my medical practice, without regard to time or method. I had to fling my material hastily together, just as I found it. There was no opportunity to let my thoughts mature.

While few of us will need to revise and rethink hundreds of published pages, it is likely most of us have mental material in need of revision but often ignored because of the press of our lives. Retirement offers us the chance to do as Jung did, to contemplate the acts of youth, not to ask for forgiveness but to write a better story.