

Slouching Toward the Big Sabbatical

Anticipating retirement

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Americans tend to identify ourselves by what we do rather than who we are. Our nation thus has more than its share of workaholics, and many of us fear, rather than relish, the prospect of retirement. One hears horror stories about retirees, mostly men, especially executives, who mope around the house when they find themselves suddenly without tasks, or subordinates. Not long ago, I ran into my former optician, about a year after he retired. He was having trouble adapting to his new freedom and had some advice for me: Don't retire unless and until you have a firm plan in place. He hadn't followed his own advice, and was still finding reasons to drop by his old business a couple of times a week.

I have no firm plans for my retirement, but I'm committed to a date: August 31, 2011. I've convinced myself that retirement for professors is not as traumatic a transition as it may be for those in other walks of life. Academics are insulated from some of the shock of retirement. After all, old scholars never die, they just read larger and larger print.

Like most people approaching the big day, I have some anxiety about the prospect of receiving that final pay check and living off my pension and Social Security. In my case, "pension" is just a euphemism for "investments," and mine haven't fared well recently—that is, since I committed myself, *irrevocably*, to a retirement date. Many baby-boomers have experienced the worst-case scenario: the markets crashed too close to our anticipated retirement dates to allow us to recover. Our retirement plans retired before we could. A recent story in *The Onion* spoke to our predicament: "Financial Planner Advises Shorter Life Span."

I'm fortunate that my wife, also an academic about my age, could, if necessary, teach part-time beyond our common retirement date. We have no children, and those whose nests have always been

empty tend to have much larger nest eggs. We've lived modestly in an area where the cost of living is relatively low. We're not nearly as well off as we were a year ago, but we are still secure. And the markets, though not the economy as a whole, seem to be on the rebound.

Another qualm is particular to my profession. At one time, full-time faculty members could assume they would be replaced when they retired; hence, they could create openings for junior scholars by unilateral action. That may no longer be the case. It's by no means certain that my shoes will be filled by an aspiring young academic. And not having had children, I had more invested in that form of self-replacement than many of my colleagues.

My parents were both public high school teachers who looked forward to an active, financially secure retirement. But before either could retire, they became ill, took medical leaves, and died. I've come to terms with their early deaths, but only recently have I begun to reckon with the fact that their deaths deprived me of a family precedent of retirement, not to mention of growing old.

Chances are that I will live a good deal longer than my parents, both of whom died in their sixties. I am physically fit and active and, as far as I know, in good health. With current life expectancies, retirement for many baby-boomers will constitute a third of our life spans, the length of our careers. That's a lot of time to be idle.

I have some concerns about the possibility that I might live so long after I retire. Many in my generation do not envision our retirements as "life as usual" minus our jobs. To think of retirement that way is not helpful for those of us who have been lucky enough to *enjoy* our jobs.

For those who work at physically demanding jobs, retirement promises a welcome respite. I understand that: when I did such work, as a teenager, I could hardly keep my eyes open after dinner. Time off was for recovery more than for recreation. For those whose jobs are sedentary but stimulating, however, the prospect of permanent leisure can be threatening. We prefer to think of retirement as

involving value added rather than labor deducted—engagement in significant new endeavors rather than just relaxing and spending our hard-earned pensions. I am perversely jealous of people I know who dislike their jobs and can thus anticipate retirement without these reservations.

Then there is "status anxiety." Having been high achievers all of our lives, we are nervous about how we will occupy ourselves once we stop working. Many experience retirement as a demotion. When we no longer have our jobs, we lose our occupational status; our titles become anachronistic. We will in some sense become has-beens. After retirement, I could still *call* myself "Professor Couser" or "Dr. Couser," but I don't think I'll be comfortable doing so when I am no longer carrying out the functions associated with those titles. I'll still have my doctorate, but, as my first wife once said, I'm not the kind of doctor who makes people better. I'll just be "Mr. Couser," "Tom," or, to strangers, "sir."

Academics do have some advantages as we approach retirement. No matter how hard we work our profession allows us a good deal of discretion about how and where to spend our time. I am not referring just to the time off, about four months a year. Even when we are working, we don't spend very much time visibly "at work" in the workplace. Even during term, much of our work is done off campus, and we exercise considerable discretion over how to allocate our time and energy, given this autonomy. Our work necessarily involves multitasking: research and committee work as well as teaching, course prep as well as classroom teaching. The academic year has its rhythms; properly viewed, it involves a cycle of renewal, rather than deadly repetition. Since our routine is hardly routine, we're used to changing pace and shifting gears.

We're fortunate in that, unlike many workers, we will not be completely deprived of our occupation or our network of colleagues by our retirement. Indeed, for many academics, retirement won't mean stopping work at all. Our research and writing can proceed

without the competing duties and distractions of academic lives. For those of us who think academic life is ideal except for those pesky students, retiring should be like dying and going to heaven.

Part of my preparation for retirement, then, has been to practice it before it begins. My situation has allowed me to work less hard in the final years of my teaching career. I am approaching my pre-retirement period somewhat selfishly; I'm putting my time and energy into those activities that I relish, and relinquishing the others. In return for committing to a firm date five years ahead of time, I teach a slightly reduced course load, and I have a repertoire of courses that I've developed myself and enjoy teaching. I try to stay fresh by refining my courses, but at this point I don't need to work up new ones. With retirement approaching, rather than thinking, "Well, I only have to teach X so many more times," I find myself thinking, "Gee, I only *get* to teach X a few more times." And my reduced course load allows me to do each class greater justice. So I am enjoying teaching more than ever.

I can also do as much committee work as I like. Which is to say, not much! I've done more than my share. I've always taken personnel work seriously, but I've never enjoyed it, especially hiring. I hate serving on search committees when I know that so many promising candidates will not get any job at all; reading applications makes me feel guilty for *having* a job.

There is a down side to making this commitment to a retirement date. Even if we don't draw back a bit from departmental concerns, our status is diminished; our days are numbered and everybody knows it. We're lame ducks. Our views can be safely ignored. Having been denied tenure in my first job, I remember what that "terminal year" was like. Being denied tenure amounts to a social death. On a small campus, everyone knows your fate, and people ignore you as having no further role in the institution; you pass like a ghost through the halls and across campus. Colleagues may shun you as though you had a communicable disease. The circumstances

of retirement are crucially different because it is voluntary (more or less), but the social dynamics are similar.

Having reduced my course load and scaled down my committee work, I am working least hard just when I am earning most. I acknowledge the irony. If you're a tenured full professor, you don't do much committee work, you're no longer inventing new courses, and you're under no pressure to publish—then the job really *is* quite easy. But it's only this easy because I'm *about* to retire.

I think of retirement as the big sabbatical. I've never been one of those who have claimed that when they retire they're finally going to finish—or begin—that big book. I've written five academic books, and I'm not sure I want to write any more. It doesn't pay. When I was younger, I always felt pressure to produce quickly—partly to meet professional standards, partly out of fear of being preempted, and partly out of competitiveness—but now I find the dynamic is reversed. My impulse is no longer to hurry into print. I find myself dragging my feet on the projects I have underway, pacing myself so that my works in progress will remain in progress past my projected date of retirement.

One hears of people who reinvent themselves after retirement. They join the Peace Corps or start small businesses or non-profits, and so on. I admire their energy and enterprise, but I'm quite sure I don't want to do anything of that sort. I know I wouldn't want to undertake something that would *reduce* my prized autonomy or impose a rigid schedule. I don't intend to sacrifice those attractive features of the academic life when I retire. Like lots of academics, I found the optimal venue for my talents and my interests; retirement does not beckon as a release from a day job to follow my bliss. On the contrary, my profession has paid me to follow my passion. This may be why so few academics opt for the radical scenario for retirement: the total departure. Most academics just continue doing the same thing. They can be seen on campuses, in libraries, still researching, still writing, still publishing.

I hope to discover some new interests, but I have stopped worrying about what they might be. I have developed a repertoire of semi-facetious possibilities: “learn to tap dance,” “learn to play the dobro,” “work on my abs,” and so on. I’m already enjoying spending more time just reading for pleasure. The life of the literary professoriate is such that that many of us read very narrowly: mostly what is required by our scholarly projects. This is ironic because it deprives us of the very gratification that drew us to the vocation in the first place. Similarly, one of the regrets of my working life is that although I think of myself as loving music, I have rarely made it or listened to it. I don’t enjoy my own piano playing unless I practice enough to be proficient, and that takes more time than I have been inclined to give it. I’m unable to do much of anything else while listening to music, and I’m too compulsive to do only that, so I’ve rarely indulged myself in pure listening. I hope that that might change, and I’ve got the iPod to prove it. I’ve rediscovered the joy of music using a device I never thought I’d want to own.

The question, “What are you going to do when you retire?” is often less about what I’m going to do than it is about the person who’s asking it. We’re curious about major transitions awaiting us, so we interrogate and monitor those who precede us, and among foreseeable life transitions, retirement is one that makes a lot of us nervous. It represents the last transition before the big sleep. We all have to find a formula that works for us, and “planning” may not be the answer, at least for academics. We’ve been semi-retired all along.