



MARTIN TOGNOLA FOR WSJ

The Point of Retirement? Enlightenment, or at Least Calm

More and more people are finding reasons to stay on the job well into old age. They may be setting themselves up for a difficult end.

MARK EDMUNDSON

Winter is the season when the most Americans retire. But this year's retirement wave may be a little smaller than last's. There seems to be a growing consensus among the accomplished and influential that you should never surrender your occupation.

Peter Thiel thinks retirement is for losers; Ben Shapiro says that 65 is way too early to pack it in; and Elon Musk is not giving up until there are humans on Mars and maybe not even then.

Even a half century ago, in her brilliant book, "The Coming of Age," Simone de Beauvoir was commending a long life of perpetual action.

More projects! More ventures!

I get it. I'm 73, love my job at the University of Virginia and have no immediate plans to walk away. In fact, there was a time I got annoyed when anyone pushed me on the subject: "When *are* you going to retire? You can't teach at UVA forever, can you?"

When this began about ten years ago, my answers were sometimes a touch impolite. The subtext, and sometimes the text, was often Mind Your Own Business.

In time, I came up with a saner reply: "I'll keep working," I'd say, "as long as I can do my job reasonably well." That satisfied most of my interlocutors, and it satisfied me.

I was encouraged in this wish to go on by my gradschool advisor, Harold Bloom, who kept churning until the end, writing books well into his eighties. It's said that he was dictating more criticism on the gurney that carried him to his final operation. He said that he never thought about death and that he would never retire. "They can take me out by the heels," I heard him say. "By the heels!" I wanted to follow his lead. But lately, I've come to think I might be wrong. Retirement may be something that a person truly needs, though not for the standard reasons. The established image of a prosperous and happy retirement is well known. One travels to see alluring sights: I've had my eye on Mexico City for a long time. One socializes with friends: Forty years in Charlottesville has brought me many smart and genial ones. One picks up a new sport, though you'll have to count me out for pickleball: The pock-pock-pock sound sends me around the nearest bend.

That all sounds fine. But is it possible that there might be a deeper meaning in the idea of retirement? Maybe it's a phase of development not unlike childhood, youth and middle age. Those phases have their goals. The child matures, leaves his family and becomes a part of the human community. The young person finds a vocation and maybe a mate. The middle-aged person consolidates his gains and harvests what he's sown.

If you asked the Dalai Lama, whose work I've been studying off and on for the last thirty years, what retirement is for, he would, I think, answer that it's for enjoying your life in a decent, compassionate way. But he would also tell you that retirement is about getting ready to die. To the Dalai Lama, all of life should contain some preparation for death, but that preparation should become more important in the last phase.

According to the Dalai Lama, you want to leave the world in as calm and composed a way as possible. You want to be fully present at your own passing, with a mind clear and, if possible, not clouded by medications. You want to do all you can to move beyond the very human fear of death and get as close to tranquility as you can. You can do this through meditation. While you meditate you brood on the impermanence of all things, including yourself, and envision yourself as a corpse, lying out on a bier, all life gone. This will happen. It's inevitable.

Hindus commend a phase of life that they call Sanyassa. In it, an elderly person gives up ownership of worldly possessions. He (usually it is a male but not always) leaves home, puts on a saffron robe, picks up a staff and a beggar's bowl and begins a life of wandering. He puts aside distractions so he can focus on the life of his spirit and the prospect of death.

If I'm still churning away in my professional life, it will be hard, maybe impossible, to prepare for what is coming. It may seem noble never to retire from work and think about the end, but doing so may make you panic when the prospect of the end becomes manifest, especially if you feel it has come too soon. And who wouldn't feel that way? Montaigne said that everyone believes he has ten years left to live, no matter how dire his condition. But death comes when it will. Why does it matter if we go out calmly or kicking and squalling? The Dalai Lama believes that it will be easier to bear if we pass calmly to the next life and if death does not take us completely by surprise. There will be less pain for us overall. Less suffering. As dramatic rehearsals make the play easier to perform, rehearsing our end might make it smoother.

There's also the effect we have on the people who love us and whom we love. No one wants to be remembered as a ranting, near mad man or woman, though on a certain level there is plenty of reason to rail against death. In his best-known poem, "Do Not Go Gentle Into That Good Night," Dylan Thomas passionately urges his father to fight against death to the last breath. "Rage, rage against the dying of the light."

A friend of mine, a good and kind woman, spent her last days raging at everyone close to her. She told them her very worst thoughts about them. She could not contain her rage against the doctor, a friend, who, she felt, had misdiagnosed her. She did some serious damage to her family, not irreparable damage but serious.

As for me, I can't pretend to be an expert on this daunting subject. There are days when I think that I'll be teaching at the University of Virginia nearly forever. I believe I have ten years left and that next year I'll still have another decade to go.

At other times—wiser times, I believe—I'm able to take the guru seriously and begin to imagine the inevitable end. Begin: no better than that. A guru is one who dispels illusions, and there is perhaps no illusion so insistent, or potentially more harmful to the individual, than the illusion that he will live forever. *Note*

To enjoy a comfortable retirement and still follow the Dalai Lama's advice, we may need to follow Shakespeare's Prospero, a magician who tells us what he will do with his wand and book of incantations when he retires: *I'll break my staff, Bury it certain fathoms in the earth, And deeper than did ever plummet sound I'll drown my book.*

He also resolves to think regularly on death. Perhaps this can be done in the midst of the hurly burly of the professional world, but it's not easy. It will be hard for me to go without the class preparation, those lively students and even (I think) the grading of papers. But choosing retirement may be the best way to get ready for what is to come.

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