

WHEN I GROW UP: THOUGHTS AT 70

By

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Early in my career, from which I am now retired, I was the assistant to a man who was a major figure in our field. When he hired me, I was about 35; he was about 60. One day I sat in when he was interviewed by a man even younger than I who was conducting a study to figure out what made social entrepreneurs like my boss tick. After an hour or so, the interviewer asked him, "Now that you are reaching the end of your career, is there anything special that you would still like to accomplish?" A stricken look crossed my boss's face before he answered, "What are you talking about? I haven't even decided what I want to do when I grow up."

A funny line, I thought then, and I have stolen it many times. It's always worth a smile if not an outright laugh.

Recently, however, two friends in their late 60s have said wryly, but clearly seriously, that they are trying to figure out what to do when they grow up. One has already retired and is getting tired of reading mysteries. The other is a very active and highly regarded leader in his field who is wondering what's next because he would like to stretch himself and do something that calls for new perspectives. He has made several changes in the course of his career, but within his field. Maybe, he feels, he should make a more significant change, maybe even shifting fields so as to have a new opportunity, as he put it, "for contribution and for full engagement of mind and heart."

Two is not enough for responsible research, of course; but I am willing to declare, nevertheless, that deciding what to do when they grow up is on the minds of many people who are aging.

It has certainly come up for me again. I am 70, three years into my second retirement. (I flunked the first.) I thought I had figured out how to retire well, until a few weeks ago when I informed the graduate school where I have taught part-time for 15 years that I have decided to stop teaching. As soon as I made it official, I realized that teaching has been a way to continue my career despite being retired, a way to retain the core my personal identity but with a lot less work and stress.

Now what? Now who will I be?

For me, what to do next should be an easy question to answer. In addition to my career in social work, I have been and continue to be a writer, a semi-professional photographer, and a jazz pianist. I publish short essays a couple of times a month; I

exhibit my work frequently, and I have a regular gig with a group I lead, which includes very good musicians with whom I am very happy to be playing. These avocations take a good deal of time, give me a great deal of pleasure, and keep me challenged. But they are all just avocations for me and not, at least so far, the core of my identity.

In addition, I have recently become a grandfather for the first time. Quite a number of people I know seem to find that role fulfilling. They tell me how lucky I am and how much I am going to love being a grandfather. And they are not wrong, I think. I like the baby a lot and enjoy playing with him even though he's only a few months old. It will get better later, I think, when I can actually talk with him and teach him things he's not likely to get from my daughter and her husband, such as how to play baseball. But there is just no way being a grandfather can become a satisfactory self-definition for me as it seems to be for some people.

But so what? Lately, I've been asking myself, what's the big deal about identity in old age? I've had a good career, left a small but meaningful legacy, and so far am still remembered with respect for my contributions, limited though they were. I've had -- and still have -- a good marriage, a child I am proud of, the most brilliant grandson there's ever been, and a broad range of interests that fill my time. What more do I want? Maybe it's time to just take pleasure in living well, to find peace where there once was ambition -- and anxiety.

What a thought! Forget about achievement, forget about recognition, forget about being productive, stop regretting the slippage of time and the sloth of pleasant days.

Very hard for me! My meaning then would be in my past, not in my present or in my future.

That raises yet another question, what's the big deal about meaning? Is it possible to achieve a state of well-being without meaning and without caring about being meaningful?

I've got to think about this, but it's time now for my exercise class and then I have to get things together for my gig tonight. And tomorrow, I have to go to the doctor to have my aging heart checked. I'm afraid I won't have time for a while to figure out who I want to be when I grow up.