

Why Retirement Is a Dirty Word

When I left Thomas Nelson a few years back, it seemed like every other person I met asked if I was retiring. I bristled every time I heard the question.

In fact, the more I think about the purpose and meaning of work, the more I'm convinced that nothing destroys our sense of purpose and health more than the modern notion of retirement. It's detrimental to us individually and collectively.

The truth is I'm more creative and engaged now than I've ever been. I'm not slowing down any time soon.

Buying Us Off

Retirement has always been used as a way for people in authority to induce behaviors in others for their own purposes. Augustus Caesar, for instance, gave his former soldiers big pensions to prevent them from becoming disgruntled and overthrowing the government.

And Chancellor Otto von Bismark threw a wet blanket on socialist radicals in Germany by offering payouts to the elderly.

The common denominator in these and other examples is that retirement was a way of buying people off and getting them out of the picture. I think the modern idea of retirement, stemming directly from the industrialized workplace, is the same.

The idea is that you can induce someone to do repetitive, soul-killing work with little emotional benefit if you promise a big enough carrot at the end of the stick. For people in my parents' generation, it was the only way to keep the machine rolling.

How to Murder Your Heart

This is a terrible and dehumanizing way to think of work. It assumes that workers have no real value beyond output. Once their productive years are over—however that's determined—then we send them out to pasture.

The only way to get workers to play along is to convince them that the pasture is lush and relaxing. *Suck it up now because it's going to be wonderful in a few decades.*

The effect is that we've now raised a few generations to look for fulfillment in the pasture, not their work. Satisfaction is a future thing, not a present possibility. Joy is for later. Meaning and significance comes from checking out down the road.

If you're looking for a way to murder your heart, then congratulations. That's it.

The Cost of the Trade

I reject the whole thing. The costs are just too high:

- It encourages alienation from our work.
- It wrongly assumes those who have lived the longest and experienced the most have the least to offer.
- It comes with significant health risks, including reduced mental function, heart attack, and stroke.
- It often comes with feelings of purposelessness and loneliness.
- It deprives our communities of the contributions we still have to give.

For those who look at life from the Christian perspective, think of people like Moses and Caleb. They were productive to the very end. Job's best days were his last days. We would trade that?

Not me.

Time to Think Differently

The best answer to the culture of checking out is to think differently about our calling in midlife and beyond. Here are three steps to doing that:

1. **Eliminate the word “retirement” from our vocabulary.** It's an unhealthy concept. If we chose to use late life as an opportunity to change directions in our work, great. But it's not retirement. Staying meaningfully engaged in the world is essential for a sense of purpose.
2. **Keep the door open to our own contributions.** If retirement has been a way to get people out of the picture, why do that to yourself? The more you know and grow, the greater potential contribution you have to make. Stay committed to playing full out till the end. How?
3. **Recommit to work we love.** When Duke Ellington was asked why he didn't retire and live off his royalties, he responded, “Retire to what?” It wasn't that home was so empty. It was that his work was so full. He lived his art. Retiring would have been like turning off his own soul.

If you're doing meaningful work you enjoy, why would you ever want to quit? And if you're not doing meaningful work you enjoy, it's probably time to reconsider what you're doing before your only real option is hoping for some shade in the pasture.

Thankfully some polling I've seen shows that people are increasingly retiring retirement. It's an idea whose time is long over.

http://michaelhyatt.com/retirement.html?utm_source=Michael+Hyatt+Newsletter&utm_campaign=d552dabd18-digest&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_d1fa5823d7-d552dabd18-250536125