

Retire to  
**PLAY AND  
PURPOSE**

**How to have an  
amazing time going forward**



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# 1: Things They Don't Tell You at the Retirement Party



People approaching retirement frequently fill their conversation with all the things they don't like about work. Their friends quickly join the litany. To hear a lunch bunch talk about work sometimes is to wonder why they are there at all—it sounds so bad. In comparison, retiring is a veritable Shangri-la, freedom from all the inane, crazy, demeaning, demanding things nobody likes about work.

Don't get me wrong. I'm all for dumping inane, crazy, demeaning, demanding things. Put me in charge! Hire the dumpster. Who likes that stuff?

But is retirement going to be the opposite? Hmmm. Will retirement be a magic, "feel good" potion? Come on. Am I hearing a carnival barker in there somewhere trying to hawk the secrets of mysteries behind the veil? Well, step right up. Has he a deal for you!

Besides, haven't we seen this pattern of talk before?

Teenagers getting ready to leave the nest and go out on their own do the same thing: bad-mouth home. A few years later, home doesn't look so bad. They've gone through a natural process of preparing to separate from one thing to be able to move to something new in their lives.

Dredging up all the not-great things about work is also a well-worn way of preparing for separation and transition. You have to beat the drums before the band can play. It is a ritual.

However, work has been the source of many things in our lives that we often don't even realize, especially as we approach retirement. So we're taken by surprise by feelings of loss. It may not be the loss of work itself that we feel, rather it is the loss of the good things—not just a paycheck—that work supplies. We don't miss working, but we miss things we have taken for granted. Things we experience through work.

Some of us in retirement feel the loss keenly. Life isn't happening. An expectation isn't met. A familiar reward is missing. A valued skill is no longer useful, or no longer has meaning.

For others of us, the feeling is an undercurrent. We're not clear about what the losses are. We might not have known ahead of time that we liked "driving the ship" as my friend Terry expressed. He found that out only when the ship disappeared. We may not know what we expected to happen, but we unexpectedly feel sad.

For many retirees, work had meaning, which in itself is a new thing in society and history. You and I share a place in the first generation that went wholesale after careers that made a difference. We wanted to change the world and saw vocation as a tool in our arsenal that would impact society for the better.

How was this goal for work different? Before our time work rarely had "meaning." My dad never spoke of his work as a tool and dye maker. It was just work. Our grandparents would have been appalled at the notion of quitting a job because "it no longer had meaning." You weren't supposed to like work. You were just supposed to do it. "Take care of your family" trumped "take care of me."

You and I may several times have quit a job because it wasn't holding up to far-reaching goals we set for it. And, if we've not actually quit, we've been overheard saying, "I don't like the work I do." As if liking a job made a difference.

I know some folks who refuse to retire. I know several people who feel their jobs make a difference. I'm not surprised they don't want to give that up. Retirement destinations often appear unstructured and unrewarding compared with careers that are meaningful—and part of our lives right now.

So, for those leaving a fulfilling job, retirement can result in sadness, maybe anxiety, grief, and even depression. Retirement is literally a loss. If you happen to be one of those people who feel they make a difference, the sadness may be unexpected but understandable.

Retirement is a major transition. We have spent a great deal of our lives expecting to work, training for work, or working. And now work is gone? So, even if you're like my friend Buddy who "got into retirement in three seconds," you are likely to have to make some adjustment to no longer being in the work or career game. Work may not have been meaningful, you may actually like having it behind you, but at the same time, it certainly is gone!

At retirement, we leave a portion of ourselves behind. We have changed in a way that involves how we think of ourselves. We are no longer the person we were. A reorientation is needed, but it can't be achieved until we think about how to replace or to deal with what we left behind.

If you don't think this fundamental change won't hit you or it hasn't hit you yet, I'd like you to consider this situation: Here you are, a nicely retired person at a party. Things are going great. You meet somebody new, who asks,

"So, what do you do?"

You've heard that question countless times over the last decades. Heretofore, you've had an answer. But now you are retired. Who are you? What do you say?

The expected answer generally centers on a job or career. Do you have the expected answer? What will it feel like when you no longer are seen as a contributor, a breadwinner, a player in the game? You may feel sidelined, like a spectator at a game you used to be good at and were proud to play. Who are you, now? What's your **identity**?

Before you can move on, you need to examine where you've come from. What have you left behind? Let's talk about a few of the things.

## **Eight Surprising Things That Go Missing**

Obviously, you've left a paycheck behind. You may not actually miss it too much on a financial level, but you may be surprised on a deeper level when it stops coming.

Earning power isn't called "power" for nothing. When you were younger, you had the capacity to earn a bit more—a promotion, a special project, a bonus, a second job. In retirement such options may not be possible. Knowing you no longer have that power can be frightening. You have less to lean on. It's not just the paycheck that is gone, it is the **power** that having a job brings.

So you may consider going back to work. But if you are like me, you just don't want to do that job anymore. I spent forty years designing and developing computer software. It was challenging, rewarding, interesting; but after forty years, I was tired of it! So, I decided to stop doing it.

And now that I've been retired for a while, my **marketable skills** are limited because I haven't kept up. In the software engineering business, a person can be out of date in six months to a year. I'm not likely to be able to get back in the field, even if I wanted to.

If you try to re-enter the job market, you really feel a loss when an employer passes over your gray-headed experience and wisdom in favor of a younger, more vigorous candidate—one who can be hired for half the cost! The young one is likely perceived as more technologically up to date, more innovative. Mix this attitude with our society's general devaluing of older people, and you begin to see why a potential employer may have marked your application "over-qualified."

When you can't get back in, you feel limited. If you are bypassed or replaced by a younger person, you may feel rejected. You may even feel lonely. You will certainly feel less able, which leads to feelings of meaninglessness.

I'm not saying this picture is the way things ought to be. You ought to be valued for your experience. Doors should swing wider for you because you know how these things should be done! Right? But, sadly, part of the competition you face when you try to re-enter is a bias toward youth. If not that, then a bias toward lower wages—new hires don't command your salary.

Additionally, you can feel powerless when you've lost your **network**. For thirty of my forty years, I was an independent consultant. That meant I kept my eyes and ears open for the next job around the corner. I had a set of friends I often paired with on jobs. I would ask for their help, and they'd ask for mine. While most of these people are still around, my technical credibility is shrinking. This reduction in marketability means that getting back in—even with my network—would be an uphill struggle. The door is closing.

To a consultant, the network is even more important because it is the closest thing to having a sense of belonging. When you jump from project to project and, usually, from employer to employer, your network is your lifeline to a **community**.

I was fortunate over the last eleven years of my career to be able to concentrate on the work of two clients. I came to know the people and what they were trying to achieve. I made friends. I was seen as a partner in the work. I belonged. And when I left, I lost both communities—the ties to my network and the ties to the people for whom I did the work.

You may feel a similar loss even if you work or worked for one employer. You too may miss that sense of **belonging** when the door closes behind you.

My wife, Crys, was one of those individuals who felt the reality of retirement when the paycheck stopped coming. This very symbolic loss struck her profoundly. She had worked hard to become a valued professional in a corporate world in an era when women in the workplace have routinely been undervalued. Clearly, earning a paycheck was, to her, more than just having money to pay bills.

The paycheck was a symbol for a whole constellation of job-related things. Work gave her life **meaning**. She was valued at work. She gave back at work. She was a contributor.

To be sure, the paycheck is significant on a survival level. It brings a sense of security. But in our culture it also represents a myriad of other things that center on who we are:

- ..The paycheck is a measure of **achievement**. You have spent years studying and honing a skill set. The paycheck symbolizes that accomplishment; it's a reward for getting better at something.
- ..The paycheck is a measure of **self-worth**. In this society, a bigger salary equates with being of greater value. Somebody out there thinks you are worth "the big bucks." Not hard to agree with the obvious, is it? With the big bucks I'm thinking I am worthy.

- ..The paycheck is a measure of **satisfaction**. You've put in effort and you get money out. Like a simple transaction, the more that comes out, the more you're satisfied that you've made a difference.

Of course, achievement, self-worth, and satisfaction are not necessarily tied to the paycheck—at least not totally tied to it. Your motivation may well be intrinsic; you may have internal measures that tell you that you did well, regardless of what is on the paycheck.

Losing the paycheck is largely just a pointer, a symbol of what is really gone: work, which has been a major source in your life of economic power, marketable skills, a network/community, belonging, achievement, self-worth, satisfaction, and meaning, in addition to identity.

### Seven More Surprising Losses

Leaving work means leaving other things behind, as well.

For example, what happened to all those **friends** you had at work? Do they call or come by? Do you get together for lunch or after work at the favorite watering hole? Why did they disappear? What are you going to do about it? Besides, they're so out of tune with the losses you feel (because they still have what you've lost) that you have less in common to talk about. How can they be of **support** to you?

The reverse is true, as well. For a while after I retired, I was really interested in what was happening at work. But as the activities that had consumed my workdays fell away—the decisions, projects and priorities—I gradually lost touch. Now, my interest is more of a concern for the well-being of the company and people I value. I am increasingly more distant from the work that occupies their time.

The job may also have brought you **recognition** from your employers, your peers, or your customers. People may have acknowledged your abilities and successes through awards, bonuses, testimonies, and gratitude. But now all that is gone.

Some of us miss work because of the continuous learning the job both required and provided—information, insights, technology, skills, and even new ways of being. The ready incubator of **intellectual stimulation** is gone.

I also missed work because of the **challenge** it offered. I could twist the computer's tail and get things out of it that made a difference. I got energized being able to work through technical difficulties and solve the problems. I felt a sense of triumph. I took my little stone and challenged a giant! I did it every day. Most days I won.

Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer, authors of *The Progress Principle*, say:

If we believe that our work is valuable and we are successful, then we feel good about this key part of our lives. If our work lacks value or if we feel we have failed at it, then our lives are greatly diminished.<sup>1</sup>

I contend that, even if we voluntarily leave a job where we felt our work was valuable, we may still feel no less the failure.

A time of high unemployment and slowed economy can also contribute to feelings of self-doubt. These conditions add pressure on the emotions, particularly if you volunteered to retire, or, as we say, you “took retirement.”

Retirement in a tight economic environment may feel less like a victory and more just plain foolhardy. You are giving up what a great many are desperately trying to gain. You’re tossing in the towel, walking away, leaving the scene. And every one of these phrases carries personal connotations befitting a loser, ne’er-do-well, or vagrant. You might as well live on the street. You gave up your paycheck. You fool!

And unfortunately, not all the people who retire do so of their own volition. Margaret Vickers, in the School of Management at the University of Western Sydney, in Australia, makes an interesting observation about folks who’ve been downsized (laid off, fired, let go):

Being made redundant, especially without choice, regardless of associated financial gain, is likely to be a significant source of grief. [2](#)

If you are one of the unfortunate “retired” folks who did not do so by choice, you may experience an emotional kick in the gut. The people Vickers interviewed reported being in shock when the announcement was made, of feeling betrayed by the situation, of undergoing trauma. The loss is not only the job but also the sense of **choice** and at least a bit of control of your own destiny.

Retired folks, no matter how they get there, also leave the **structure** behind. A job is not just about what you did, your level of achievement, or even about being recognized for your work. A job also takes time. A worker usually spends eight hours a day at work and another 46–50 minutes per day commuting.[3](#) Add in time for lunch, hauling kids to daycare and back, and an odd errand or two in preparation for work and you have a large daily investment.

That time commitment is just the beginning. For many, work expands to fill even more space. Ten-hour days become normal, and these are known to stretch to twelve.

Needless to say, you don’t have daily commute time in retirement. On the contrary, in retirement you can suddenly find your day filled with empty space, overflowing with time you never had before. How do you act? What will you do? What will get you up in the morning? Phew! Will you even bother to get up in the morning?

Retirement can present decisions you may never have had to face before. You had to go to school. You had to go to work. For much of that 60 years’ worth of time you had to get out of bed! What do you do when the “have-to” goes away? Are you like my friend Marcia, who says, “I need something to do, or I’ll stay in my jammies all day”?

So, what could we lose in retirement? Let’s make a list:

- ..Identity
- ..Power
- ..Marketable Skills
- ..Network/Community
- ..Belonging
- ..Meaning
- ..Achievement
- ..Self-worth
- ..Satisfaction
- ..Friends
- ..Support
- ..Recognition
- ..Intellectual Stimulation
- ..Challenge
- ..Choice
- ..Structure
- ..And sometimes income

And, what do we gain? A large hole in the day where work used to be.

Surprise!

Now, I'm not saying you will experience a sense of loss for all these. I sincerely hope that will not happen to anybody. But I do expect after a year or so in retirement, you will look back over that initial period and recognize a loss or two or three out of the lineup.

The answer to the loss you feel is not necessarily to go back to work or to stay on the job until you drop. The answer lies in finding new sources for the things you used to get from work. Things you don't think much about until they're gone.

Which puts the ball back in play. In the next chapter let's smack that ball back and forth on the issue of things to avoid and things to do as soon as retirement hits.

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1 The Progress Principle, by Teresa Amabile and Steven Kramer. Copyright © 2011 by Teresa M. Amabile and Steven J. Kramer. Published by Harvard Business Review Press.

2 "Journeys Into Grief: Exploring Redundancy for a New Understanding of Workplace Grief," by Margaret H. Vickers in the Journal of Loss and Trauma, Issue 14, 2009.

3 Gallup's 2007 annual Work and Education survey reported American workers had a 46-minute round-trip commute. The American Community Survey Reports for 2009 reports a round-trip time of 50.2 minutes.