RETIRING Without Regrets

by Michael Gordon, Ph.D.

My father retired at 58, in part because he could just manage it financially, but mainly because my mother had been diagnosed with multiple myeloma a few years prior. Her mother was also becoming increasingly infirm. He figured it made sense to retire and enjoy the time he could with wife and family. They joined my grandparents in Florida, made the most of their time together, and lived out their days in the sun.

Following my father's example, I retired from my full-time faculty position at the medical center at the age of 59. The timing was right: our kids were grown and self-sufficient, the university offered a once-in-a-lifetime buyout aimed at thinning the ranks of senior faculty, and our lifestyle was modest enough that retirement was affordable.

I also wanted to help our younger son build a business based on a software program I had designed. I had an entrepreneurial bent that wanted some more exercise. It proved to be a valuable investment of time and energy.

It's a fact that I was plain fortunate to be born at the right time to take advantage of that retirement program, had children who didn't need much more funding, and a wife who worked and managed our finances successfully. Yes, I know full well that others, for many reasons, have not had an early (or even late) retirement option open to them. I simply was lucky.

It took me a while to think through a life other than the one I had planned for, which was essentially working until someone carted me out of my office. Much of my personal identity and sense of self-worth was wrapped up in being a professor and clinician. It was odd to think of myself in any other way.

But I took the leap. Some of it was out of selfishness because I didn't see the point of continuing to work just to generate more income to pass on to heirs who didn't need it. Part of it was due to changes at the medical center that discouraged developing new programs. The rest was out of a general fear that I would miss out on a whole lot of fun if I continued the daily grind.

What I didn't know at the time I was making this decision was that there were other psychological retirement benefits I could not have anticipated. But I think they're important considerations:

You don't appreciate the burdens of responsibility until they are lifted – Three or four months after I retired, I woke up one morning and realized that my mind was completely free of job-related worries or concerns. I didn't fret about whether my patients were safe and progressing, whether our trainees were learning and content, whether my research program would generate meaningful results, and so on. I came to realize just how much stress I had been under all those years and how relieved I felt when it dissolved. The research suggests I might even live a bit longer as a consequence.

It is profoundly calming to know that, retired, you'll have much more time to handle the bad stuff that will inevitably come your way – Sure, I did what I had to do to manage family medical emergencies or other sentinel events. But it wasn't easy juggling those responsibilities along with job demands. And I'm pretty sure I couldn't do as much as I might have to help those who needed it. Knowing that as a retiree I have far more bandwidth for crisis management has been a blessing.

Feeling you have to justify your post-retirement existence is plain silly – I retired because I could. I had worked long and hard to get to that point. I didn't feel I had any more to prove to anyone about my work contributions. And I knew enough to realize that, while I might have thought of myself as invaluable, I wasn't. Enterprises move on, and quickly. In my case, I could also keep myself busy with consultations, working with the company I had formed, expanding my music career, writing, and traveling. Maybe I've not so much retired as I have re-engineered my life so I have more options for a good time.

I decided to write this article after I heard from a friend about his neighbor, a lawyer, who decided to put off traveling until he retired at seventy. He didn't make it. To quote that wisest of Yiddish addages, "Man plans. God laughs."

In his final hours, perhaps he said to himself, "Thank God I kept working so I could handle all those additional cases and cement my reputation in the community." It is possible that he truly loved being a lawyer and was happy to keep working until his final breath.

But I think he might have instead felt regret, thinking to himself, "Why didn't I stop working earlier so my wife and I could have traveled, spent more time with the grandchildren, and enjoyed our lives together?"

This last scenario is what I have desperately tried to avoid. In my final pre-shiva moments, I want few regrets and a head full of rich memories.

Retirement Wisdom

How to avoid stress at work: **1. Don't go to work.**

What do you call someone who's always happy on Mondays? Retired.

Retirement is the time in your life when time is no longer money.

How many retirees to change a light bulb? Only one, but it might take all day.

Retirement: the pay sucks, but the hours are really good.

Retirement is not the end of the road. It is the beginning of the open highway

Money is something you have to make in case you don't die.

Retirement means no pressure, no stress and no heartache, unless you play golf.

Life begins at retired.

Retirement is a journey, not a destination.