

Reflections on Retirement

I finally, really retired in the spring of 2014. I say *finally* and *really* because it was a 10-year process, beginning with an early retirement in 2003. I continued to work—a lot—during my first retirement: I taught classes, I helped lead the development of the Oregon Consortium for Nursing Education, I continued my scholarship, I continued as Editor of the *Journal of Nursing Education*, and I consulted with faculty throughout the country. For some reason, my friends and colleagues really didn't believe I had retired. And I hadn't. I wasn't ready.

Fast forward 10 years. After officially *unretiring* in 2012 to do an 18-month stint as Interim Dean, I felt really ready to retire. And so now, 2 years into my retirement, I am truly disengaged from academic nursing in a way I never expected to be—well, almost, given that I *am* writing this editorial. But I feel no obligation to continue to contribute to nursing, and I can be very selective regarding the professional work I take on.

I know that many of my colleagues in academic nursing are struggling with retirement decisions and worry about life after retirement. So I happily agreed to share some of my experiences with this process and some of what I have learned.

Readiness to Retire

The decision to retire can be tough, particularly when it's understood as a shift from full engagement in academic life to complete cessation of work. For me, work provided social interactions, intellectual stimulation, and a sense of contributing to a higher purpose. For most of my career, work fed my soul. Even with my very busy family, church,

and community life, I couldn't imagine a life without the university and my connections there. My early foray into retirement was deeply unsatisfying, with failed attempts at volunteer work (e.g., of all things, managing the magazine sale at the middle school). So for many years, not having work as one central part of my life seemed pretty unattractive.

In about 2010, I began to take more serious stock of my career—What had I accomplished? What was still meaningful to me? What was left to be done? What else did I want out of life? And through these reflections, I began to look forward to days of unscheduled time, where I could spontaneously decide to go for hike in the woods, meet a friend for coffee, read a trash novel, take a wood-working class. I began to pull back from some of my involvement, finding that I was able to sustain important relationships while easing my work demands.

I was about to make the retirement move, when I agreed to step into the Interim Dean role. That decision was not out of fear of the retirement abyss, but rather out of loyalty to the institution, my colleagues, and my students and the sense that I was actually well-prepared to take on the role. While I briefly considered continuing in the role beyond the interim period, I was far enough along in my retirement deliberations that I knew I was ready. I retired 6 months after the new dean arrived.

Making the Transition

During my last several months of employment and first several months of retirement, I traveled to visit friends who were mostly retired. In retrospect, this

was a series of field trips through which I evaluated several models of retirement by witnessing my friends' experiences with it. What did I like about each? What did I find attractive? What would life be like for me if I retired in the way that these friends did? It was incredibly informative.

My friends all advised me to take a year, at least, without work obligations, without consultation, without writing, just to get a feel for a dramatically new kind of life. Volunteer opportunities are abundant in retirement, as were opportunities to work on various professional projects. It was so freeing to say, "No, I'm not taking on anything right now while I figure out my retirement plans."

I learned quickly during that self-indulgent year that I needed to have a daily dose of social interaction outside my immediate family. I needed to have a planned physical activity, which I learned was far more enjoyable if I combined it with the social interactions. I joined a senior exercise class, taught by an inspiring 95-year-old retired ballerina. I planned weekly hikes with other retired friends. I took up golf again after a 25-year hiatus—all active and social activities! I planned a wedding and served as contractor for our big kitchen remodel. I advised my last doctoral student, but beyond that I stayed away from the university.

Finding New Meaning

Importantly, I got clear that I am done with academic nursing. I still do some work with national foundations that I find very rewarding and that provide opportunities for connections with old friends

across the country. But I no longer want to teach classes, lead workshops, or write scholarly articles. What I do want to do is engage more in my local community, using the skills I have developed over the years in new ways. So I helped organize a Neighborhood Emergency Team to prepare for the “big one”—an earthquake predicted to hit Oregon in the next 50 years. I ended up chairing our neighborhood association, which I find challenging and oddly satisfying. I’m working with other retired nurses, physicians, and administrators on a movement to create publicly funded, universal health care in Oregon. And I’m helping some of my non-nurse friends cope with the health issues that come with aging.

Some Final Thoughts

There are probably as many ways of spending retirement as there are people

retiring. Unlike my choices, many of my colleagues have decided to continue involvement in academic nursing, as emeriti, mentoring young faculty, continuing their scholarship, or teaching on a more limited basis. Others are doing what might be called *academic tourism*, seeing the world and meeting interesting colleagues by consulting with faculty across the globe. For some, retirement is not a choice because of health issues on the one hand or financial insecurities on the other. For all, making decisions about work as we age involves an ongoing internal dialogue. There are probably some other universals:

- Retirement is a process, not an event.
- Figuring out what sustains you beyond your academic life is the most important part of preparing for retirement. Finding a hobby is probably less vital.

- For most of us, our academic career has been about relationships and making a difference. Those needs and goals don’t change with retirement.

- Nurse educators have a tremendous cache of talents and skills that can be put to use in new, interesting, and challenging ways.

- We all know that social engagement, intellectual stimulation, and regular physical activity are critical for healthy aging. Finding the precise prescription for you is an important part of the transition.

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