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In thinking about my prospective retirement and future plans, I reflect on my work life and how it has become intertwined with my identity. I have always worked, including part-time jobs in high school and college. During my last two years as an undergraduate student, I worked about twenty hours a week for the university audio-visual department (delivering movies and equipment to classrooms, showing movies, and office work), and I also had a second job working in a campus restaurant on the weekends. Since I was also taking extra classes every semester to graduate early, this didn’t leave much time for a social life, but I didn’t seem to mind. I discovered that I liked working as much as leisure time, perhaps even more. These early experiences probably shaped a lot of my future life with the idea that work was a central part of who I am.

My work ethic was challenged, however, by the next stage of my life as a Peace Corps Volunteer in Malaysia—a two-year assignment as a community development worker in a rural village. After settling into the kampung (village) and as my language skills improved, I was able to make friends and to establish a reasonably normal life. The initial culture shock wore off and the physical hardships (lack of running water, electricity, and all the things that I had taken for granted at home) gradually seemed pretty minor. The major problem was that I did not have a “real” job. I had no workplace to go to, no supervisor, and no colleagues. The idea of community development was to be a “change agent,” by talking with neighbours about development, nurturing leadership, and encouraging self-help community projects. Community development was a beautiful theory, but the assumption that a young Peace Corps Volunteer, no matter how idealistic and motivated, could guide a village to development was simply asking more than I could deliver. Eventually, I found a role that kept me busy and feeling productive. I spent most of my time giving talks to village development councils (Jawatankuasa Kemajuan Kampung), serving as a liaison between villagers and local government officers, helping to build sanitary latrines and wells, teaching English to children, and just being a friendly American.

The next stage of my life was as a graduate student followed by a long career as a university professor. Looking back, I consider myself very lucky to have fallen into a career that matched my temperament and interests. I often remark that my job consists of talking, reading, and writing—pretty basic skills. Of course, it is the quality of what you say and write that counts. Unlike some of my colleagues who can speak extemporaneously with great erudition and appear to write papers effortlessly, I have to put in many extra hours beyond the normal workday to be able to prepare my lectures and write publishable papers.

One aspect of my working life is sitting alone at my desk for 8 to 10 hours every day. This might seem to be a lonely activity, but I never feel bored or even alone. Being a scholar means that you are in close contact
with all other researchers in your field through reading their books and articles. Some of these people are friends whom I know very well, and I can almost hear their voices when I read their words. Of course, I do not know most of the authors on my bookshelves since they are no longer alive, but I still feel connected to them because I read and read their works. Sometimes, I can even recognize the cadence of their familiar expressions. Not all books are of the same quality, but the insights and ingenuity in the very best research studies inspire me and provide goals for my own research.

In addition to reading, I spend most of my days working with statistical data of some sort, usually trying to figure how to present research findings in the clearest possible tables and graphs. Writing and revising research reports is probably the hardest work I do. I am not a natural writer with clever expressions popping into my head. But I revise everything I write many times, and eventually, I hope that my research results are explained in an interesting and compelling story.

My work life is not entirely solitary. I teach large lecture classes and small research seminars, consult with students and attend committee and departmental meetings. Over the course of my career, I have increasingly been asked to do “professional service,” which means I review papers for journals, evaluate grant applications for funding agencies, and assess junior colleagues for promotion at my university and at other institutions. I always seem to be behind on my obligations, but I usually feel confident that everything will turn out OK, even if it doesn’t. Although I do not feel stressed, I have to admit that occasionally I lay awake at night thinking of all the things that I have to do the next day.

My workaholic career has only been possible because of a second life—as a husband, father, and grandfather. I have always tried to prioritize family events as more important than work-related activities, especially when our children were younger. But on a day to day basis, I know that the only way that I could have spent most weekdays (and even many weekends) working was because Jo (my wife) was there and willing to do most of the traditional feminine responsibilities in running a household and raising a family, and also take over most of the traditional masculine duties when I was working late or away at a conference. She has also had to change her career several times as I moved from one university to another. In recent years, I’m trying to make up for all the sacrifices that she has made for me, but I know that I will never be able to even the score.

About 20 years ago, most American universities (and many other employers) abandoned rules of mandatory retirement at age 65. There are still annual reviews of performance, and professors whose teaching or research performance is below average are encouraged to retire. There is a wide dispersion of retirement ages among professors in the United States. Most still seem to retire in the mid-60s, but quite a few continue working full time well into their 70s. Some professors formally retire, but continue to be professionally active in their research. Of course, retired professors who continue to work voluntarily are not paid.

When I was in my early 60s, I decided that I would retire at age 68. But as I got closer to the date, I postponed my planned retirement to age 70, then to 72. My current plan is to retire in June 2017 when I am 73. My procrastination in making a retirement decision might be explained in a number of ways. I still have good health and continue to enjoy almost all aspects of my work. I have a number of research projects that are still compelling. For the most part, teaching students, both in the classroom and in one-to-one conferences, is still very rewarding. I also enjoy the social experiences of work—going to the office, chatting with colleagues and students, and responding to the many day-to-day requests and inquiries. I still feel engaged and believe that I am able to make useful contributions to scholarship and to my students. However, I am a demographer and so I know that my days of productive work life cannot go on forever.

I have friends, some younger than me, who have experienced a debilitating disease. And like everyone else my age, I have many close friends who have passed away. These transitions are often very sudden—an accident or health shock can happen anytime, and the likelihood increases sharply with age. I know that the idea that my life can continue without interruption is an illusion.

Another motivation for retirement is a desire for greater flexibility in my day to day schedule. I occasionally travel during the academic year, but this conflicts with my teaching obligations. I know that students feel that I am letting them down if I am not present for every class, and they are right. I usually ask a colleague or a graduate student to take my classes when I am out of town, but I still feel very guilty about not doing my job. When I am retired, I will be able to travel to national meetings, review panels, and conferences without worrying about missing my teaching obligations. I might even be able to read the newspaper completely in the morning, instead of running to the office to be there before 8 am.

There are also a number of non-academic writing projects that I have been
putting off for many years. My parents came from very different backgrounds, and their ancestry makes for a very interesting family history. My mother was the grandchild of Irish Catholic immigrants and my father was Jewish. His paternal grandfather immigrated to the United States in the 1850s from the Duchy of Courland, then part of the Russian empire, now part of Latvia. Quite accidentally, I have a number of old family records and I feel obliged to write up some of the details in a broader historical context of nineteenth century immigration to the United States. Overall, my family history is quite unremarkable—although there is a bon vivant great uncle who becomes a minor Hollywood producer in the 1940s.

The other writing assignment is to edit a selection of Jo’s letters to tell her extraordinary life story, without embarrassing her or our children. For several decades, Jo wrote a letter every week to her mother, and her mother saved every one. The letters cover her college years, her junior year abroad to Scotland, her two years in the Peace Corps in Malaysia, and then her adventures of travel around the world and raising two precocious children. The letters are written in a conversational style with detailed descriptions of everyday life, sprinkled with humorous stories. There are also dozens of letters written to my parents and to me in the same style. This would not be a major literary project, but I think it would bring considerable pleasure to my children and grandchildren to recall family stories and what we did over the decades.

I know that many people are planning to retire to be able to do all the things that they were unable to do during their working lives. But my objectives are to continue most of what I am already doing. I want to continue to travel, but going back to familiar places is as appealing as going to new places. I want to spend as much time with my children and grandchildren as possible, but given their priorities, I know that we will be lucky to have supporting roles with occasional social visits, holiday dinners, and shared vacations. I am deeply committed to political reform and social justice, but I feel more comfortable keeping well-informed and supporting good causes with contributions rather than being on the front lines of social activism.

What advice do I have for others about retirement? I suppose that I would encourage potential retirees to reflect on their lives and to do as much advance planning as possible. Think about what you have done and left undone. One friend told me that you should not retire FROM something, but TO something. Working may have defined your life, as it has mine, but there are many other activities that can also be rewarding. I do not have it all figured out myself, but I am getting ready for the next stage of my life.