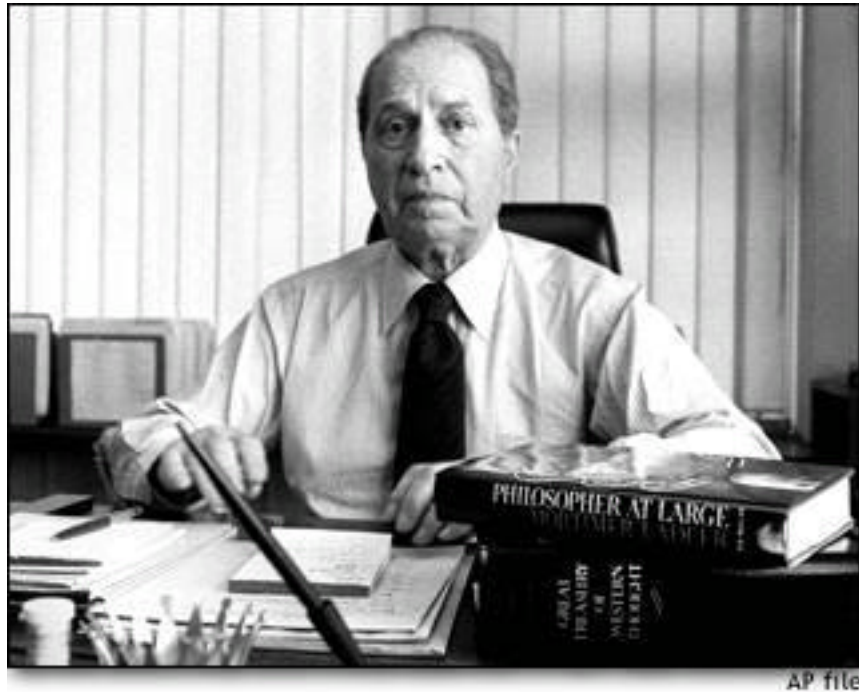


# THE GREAT IDEAS ONLINE

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## NEVER SAY “RETIRE” \* (in 2 Parts)

*by Mortimer J. Adler*

**L**ast year five million Americans retired between the ages of 45 and 50. Next year the number will rise. Early retirement is the American dream come true. But the dream come true is a nightmare. No wonder; retirement is a crime against nature, a protracted form of suicide.

We labor all our lives to assure the comfort of the “golden years.” We overwork ourselves to expedite the advent of the happy day when we can draw the last

paycheck and be free. Then, as the happy day approaches, a nebulous dread begins to take possession of us; the dread of having nothing to do. We try to offset it by picturing the things we have always wanted to do. But do we still want to do them? *Do we want to do them the rest of our lives?*

The dream of retirement begins to disintegrate before our eyes. The dread grows. The “golden years” are half-drained of their savor before they begin. And the reality—after the first few months is for most of us a dreary reality indeed.

Is the reality inevitable, or have we, in our obsession with postponed leisure, misconceived the nature of the human life cycle and the meaning of “the last of life, for which the first was made”? “Grow old along with me! The best is yet to be,” says Browning in *Rabbi Ben Ezra*. The decades of strain and striving to reach it are understandable. The you-can-take-it-easy-at-50 advertisements constitute a real incitement to retirement, celebrating as they do a kind of earthly paradise that never was or will be; a perpetual ruddy delight compounded of trout-fishing, rose bush pruning, and grandchildren on the knee.

There is certainly nothing wrong with a man’s wanting to be released from the grind that begins at 18 or 20. Today, in our increasingly specialized economy, a job is very often just a job—a means of subsistence with little or none of the inherent incentive or reward that comes to the handicrafter, or to the independent farmer who sows his own crops and cultivates and reaps them. The actual enjoyment of the job itself is incidental nowadays, and is approaching non-existence as production nears automation.

The question at hand is neither whether nor when it is good to be released from such subsistence toil; the answer to that question is, the sooner the better. The real

question is: *What then?*

The dread of imminent retirement certainly has a natural basis. On the one hand, it heralds the day when man points his footsteps to a grave, however distant. It is one of the last milestones of his life. The vision ahead may disconcert even the profoundly religious man: to the less religious, it marks the first formal stage on the road to oblivion. On the other hand, retirement signifies a radical transition from social usefulness to social superfluity, from being needed and from being productive to being “on the shelf.”

Is the transition inescapable? In one respect—the confrontation of old age and the forthcoming end—it is. The richest and best attended man must die, sooner, sometimes than the poorest. We live always with death, and, the longer we live, the more intimately.

But the transition from usefulness to desuetude is something else again. The last of life is the time of realization, not of surrender. It is the time for free and meaningful activity, not the time to be chained to the rocking chair or the croquet mallet. After 30 or 40 standstill years on the job amidst the harassments of middle life, it is finally time to distill wisdom from experience, and to give of that wisdom.

Surrender is required only of those old people who are physically and mentally helpless, exactly as it is required of young people in the same condition; it is not age but condition that is decisive. Even physical helplessness does not mean mental impairment. We have only to cite the great novelist Proust, who lived his life in a sickbed. Nor is physical helplessness, thanks to medical science, a necessary concomitant of old age; the fact that an octogenarian should not try to run the hundred-yard dash does not mean that there is nothing left for him to do but watch it.

The retirement paradox—the dread of actually getting what we have striven for—is something new in the world and is almost exclusively American. Grandma and Grandpa no longer have to go on doing back-breaking work. They can sit and watch the washing-machine or the electric furnace do it. Nor are they anywhere near as likely to be broken and bed-ridden as their aged forebears. The “prime of life” has been extended by a decade in the past 50 years, while, with labor-saving machinery, the usefulness of old people in their children’s homes has (except for baby-sitting) been almost entirely eliminated.

The conquest of disease—especially in the diseases of senility has produced, meanwhile, an “accent on youth” unknown in earlier societies and comparable today, in all probability, only to Soviet Russia’s. And this accent has intensified the normal dread of being old, of being inactive, of being incapable of the strenuous life exalted in so many advertisements for cars, boats, sporting goods, even cigarettes. The whole world is amused by our addiction to young-and-healthy nostrums. A doctor in America can hardly help but be rich. Certainly the Duke of Wellington’s heroic question to his men, “Do you want to live forever?” would be met here with a resounding “Yes.”

This emphasis on youth and health (even on the often deceptive appearance of health) has reached phenomenal proportions. It is said that Americans want to *seem* to be healthy more ardently than any other people in history. A current joke is, if hyperbolic, suggestive. Mrs. Jones turns to Mrs. Smith at Mr. Smith’s funeral and says, “He looks so natural so well.” “He ought to,” Mrs. Smith replies, “he spent the winter in Florida.”

But when the poet Browning said “the best of life is yet to be,” he obviously wasn’t thinking in terms of bodily capacity. Man is physically at his fittest in his early 20s. By the time he is 40 or 45 there are some

exertions that he shouldn't risk. But there has never been any evidence of a connection between physical inability and mental ability. The roster of ' shriveled wizards' is too long and too well known to require recitation. We need not call to mind the famous ancients—Sophocles, for instance, who was producing dramatic masterpieces at the age of 90. Our own history, past and present, is studded with them in every field.

No one doubts that our nation owes a large measure of its greatness to the "dotage" years of Franklin, Jefferson, and Adams. There is the familiar anecdote of Supreme Court Justices Holmes and Brandeis passing a pretty girl on the street, and Holmes' saying to Brandeis, "Oh, to be 80 again." The old-age achievements of men like Edison and Rockefeller in science, business, and industry are legendary.

These men, who were giants still increasing in stature in their seventh and eighth decades, had this characteristic in common: *What they did well in their old age they had been doing all their lives.* As they were in the ripe, so they had been in the green; the oak had grown as the twig. The "first of life" had prepared them for the last and best.

But the "first of life" does not here mean childhood. The best childhood education is incapable of carrying an individual through life, for the obvious reason that the great issues of later life are not truly comprehensible to the child. His capacity, prior to his experience of life, is limited to theoretical study and a kind of practical imitation.

Aristotle's truism that there are infant prodigies in mathematics and music, but never in morals and politics, remains true. The child may acquire knowledge to an amazing degree. He may even be found to have precocious understanding of the nature of things. But we cannot say of a child that, in addition to knowledge, he

has wisdom. For wisdom is the product of experience—experience evaluated and reevaluated over the whole of a responsible lifetime. Like the old dog or the old horse—or the old fox—the old man knows something that the young one doesn't. Wisdom is the one virtue that belongs, in supreme measure, to old age alone.

Society's single richest resource is human wisdom. Its waste is wickedness. Consider the spectacle of old men doing nothing. Consider the loss to society and the deprivation of the individual involved when, because he has saved enough to retire, a man in the *real* prime of life, the mental, moral, and spiritual prime, is turned out to pasture at the decree of the calendar.

Here is greatness wasted on the putting greens of Long Beach or the green benches of St. Petersburg. But what in the world (somebody will ask) is wrong with golf, or shuffleboard, or checkers, or just sitting in the sun? Nothing. They're good for a man, in some measure; good for him at every stage of his life. Even necessary, as sleep is necessary, to good health and a clear mind and a happy disposition. They are good for the tired businessman—*for a change*. But how are they for an unvaried diet, day in and day out, year in and year out, fastened, presumably as a reward for lifelong labor, on a man who has the most creative and most socially useful part of his labor still in him? The answer is: maddening.

The genuine agony of retirement in our society is familiar, in miniature, to the businessman who goes off on his vacation. Three or four weeks up at the lake with nothing to do—the goal of a whole year's labor. He may do nothing but sleep for a day or two. Then a week or 10 days of fishing or golf. Then the torment begins. He has only a week or two left to crowd in all the relaxation and sport he won't have time for the rest of the year. But at the very same time a kind of generalized restlessness sets in, characterized, at the outset, by

impatience for the daily mail from the city.

The next symptom of holiday frustration is his discovery that he has to telephone the office. Not on business, of course, but to see if he left his favorite pipe there; he's been looking for it around the cabin all morning (although he has half a dozen other pipes with him) and he can't find it anywhere or, for the life of him, remember if he brought it up to the lake at all. If he did, he's lost it; his favorite pipe . . . Well, it's lucky he just happened to call the office about the pipe because it turns out there's a big deal on, and if he could run down to the city, just for the day . . .

The man who can't stand three or four weeks of vacation without getting on everyone's nerves (his own, first of all) has had a foretaste of the permanent vacation called retirement. Fishing is great sport. So is putting the old stamp collection in order. So is gardening or waxing the car or repairing the porch. If only there were time. Then suddenly a man has nothing but time—and he finds himself condemned to fish, garden, and wax to the end of his days. He can't stand it.

Forty or fifty years of the “grind” have conditioned him to —the “grind.” He tries retirement for a while, and then, like the summer vacationer, when the novelty has worn off, and he can't bring himself to face another fish, he realizes that he has to go back to the old routine, to a job, any old kind of job. He goes down to the shop. They were glad to see him come in, when he first quit, but now.... They're busy, and he hasn't kept up with all the changes, and there's a younger man at his desk, and . . . He retired, didn't he? What's he hanging around for?

So he winds up, if he's lucky, night-clerking at a motel, or stuffing envelopes. He doesn't need the money, that's not it . . .

What he needs is to live the last of his life. But he

doesn't know how. He isn't prepared. The first of his life—up to the age of 60 or 65—did not instruct him. There was the job, and time off for recreation. Now there is time for nothing but recreation, and full-time recreation is precisely what he can't stand.

**Part 2, next issue**

\* From *The Journal of the American Society of Chartered Life Underwriters*, XVII (Winter 1963), pp 5-14.

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**LETTERS TO THE EDITOR**

In my younger days, when the Internet was barely known and Usenet newsgroups were ascendant, I spent a lot of time reading the rec. arts. books newsgroup. Periodically, someone would try to start a thread entitled “Books That Changed Your Life”, kicking it off with a list of books that purportedly changed their own lives. Others would usually chime in.

I was always irritated by those threads, because I never saw in people's descriptions any evidence that those books had actually changed their lives. In fact, for most of them a more appropriate thread title would have been “Books that I really, really liked a lot.” Occasionally, it might have been called “Books that influenced my thinking,” but I'm reluctant to refer to that as having changed one's life.

I suppose I was irritated because I had my own list of books, and each one of them had effected a concrete, specific change in my life. It wasn't very long—maybe three books at the time—but even that fact was interesting, since it showed how difficult it was for a book to change a reader, and consequently when it happened it was something worth pondering. Sometimes I would post that list to the thread, but it rarely generated a response.



Well, the list is a little longer now, and I still think the process is worth pondering. So here are some reflections on those books and what they did to me.

*How to Read a Book*, by Mortimer Adler is not only a good example of how a book can change one's life, but also an example of how difficult it is for a book to change one's life; I had to read it twice, with eight years intervening, before it finally had its way with me.



Sometime in 1982 I saw William Buckley interview Mortimer Adler on *Firing Line* about his new book *How to Speak, How to Listen*. I was enthralled by Adler, bought the book, and even tried using his techniques in preparing some technical talks; no lasting effects to report, though.

In the introduction to that book, Adler mentioned that it was a companion to a book he had written forty years earlier, namely *How to Read a Book*. So I bought that as well, read it, was mightily impressed by it, acknowledged to myself that the techniques it described were important and valuable ... and then put the book on the shelf and didn't think about it again for another eight years.

But in 1990, for reasons that I only vaguely remember now, I came to realize that I wasn't a very effective reader; my reading was scattershot, shallow, and didn't have a lasting effect on me. As I wrestled with that, I remembered Adler's book (but nothing of what it had said), and decided to read it again. This time it took; I understood what he was saying and why, and I knew I had to become the kind of reader he was describing.

Perhaps more important: somewhere in the book Adler mentions Great Books discussion groups. I looked into it and found that, during the 50s and early 60s there was a fad bordering on a movement, where groups of normal people would actually convene to discuss readings from the classics of Western literature. Imagine! Next, I found out that an organization had been formed to support and propagate these groups, the Great Books Foundation (founded by Adler), that it still exists, and that it publishes collections of readings from the Great Books for use by discussion groups.

So I gathered together five other friends, and for the next five years we convened monthly two-hour meetings, working our way through the readings. I simply can't describe to you how valuable those sessions were to me. They gave me the opportunity to apply his techniques diligently, enough for them to become habits, and to writings that were good enough to stand up under that kind of scrutiny.

Nowadays I don't always apply the techniques; most books simply aren't worth the effort. But when I stumble onto something worthwhile, a pencil will magically appear in my hand and I will begin analyzing it before I'm aware of what I'm doing.

Rick Saenz

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Thanks Max!!

This passage from *Vision of the Future* is precisely what I was looking for! It also gives me two things I've been looking for, rather than just the one about the Golden Rule. I usually begin the ethics course with the passage from the *Republic* about the Ring of Gyges, but I've been looking for an adequate way of responding to the Sophists' challenge to Socrates, "Why be just?" that could be used towards the end of the course. There are a number of places in the dialogues where Socrates claims that it is better to suffer injustice than to commit it, but I've never come across a passage in which he explains WHY this is so. This selection on the unity of the virtues fills that gap, and provides me a "missing piece" for the end of the course (which is where I discuss Aristotle, and use the Moyers/MJA video on "Goodness").

You have done me an invaluable service. Thank you for such a quick response, too!

With gratitude—

Peter Van Dusen

P.S. Your citing of Chapter 18 from *The Time of Our Lives*, makes me aware that it is now time for a complete rereading of it—thanks!

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## **WELCOME NEW MEMBERS**

**Michael Copperman**

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