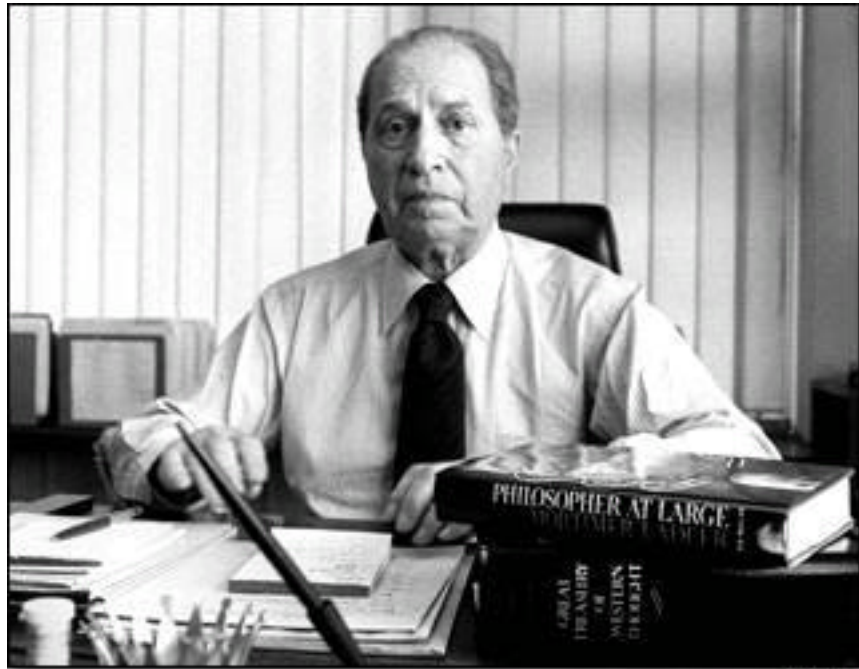


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NEVER SAY “RETIRE” *

by Mortimer J. Adler

There is the nub of the matter. Recreation—recreation—creates us anew. That is its purpose, the purpose of all diversion, all play. Of course, it’s enjoyable, but a man can live without the enjoyment of it. What he can’t live without is being re-created so that he doesn’t go stale on the job or build up too much tension by overwork. Now, after a couple of months of retirement, he discovers (consciously or unconsciously) that he is being recreated continuously *for no purpose*.

It's as if one had a good night's sleep and awoke refreshed and eager to go—with nothing to do but go back to sleep.

Even the brute animals find such a routine impossible. It's not a bovine existence, for the cow, awake, moves around looking for grass. It's not a canine existence, for the dog, although he loves to curl up by the fire and sleep, goes off to prowl when he awakes. Least of all is it an equine existence. Men who race horses know that old racehorses have to be run regularly or they die. And the workhorse, released from the shafts forever, fades fast.

Dr. Theodore C. Klump, writing on *Heart Attacks*, says . . . I am convinced that one who just sits and waits for death to come along will not have long to wait. We don't wear out: we rust out . . . Civilized man is imbued with the idea that he works hard in his earlier years to buy ease, rest and comfort in his later years. The trouble with this very understandable ambition is that when man attains this goal Mother Nature has no further use for him and starts getting rid of him."

What is the solution, or isn't there any? Are we trapped by our own progress in machinery and medicine, so that the man who has reached an ever earlier retirement age can find no work to do worthy of his undiminished abilities and thus stands condemned to slow death doing nothing? In another, and perhaps even more terrible, form, the question asked since Hiroshima is asked again: Are the blessings of science to be a curse to mankind? Is there no way to turn them to human advantage?

Not only is there a solution to the retirement problem, but a solution that requires no organization—none of the massive change of national attitude so often called for and waited upon as the individual's justification for doing none of the things that lie within

his own power. It is a solution, moreover, that is open to the generality of men, here in America, for the first time in history. It is the truly civilized—and civilizing—solution.

There is no magic about it, no pill to take, no 10-easy-lesson tricks involved. No gimmicks at all. Just—work. Work, not to assure retirement, but to prevent it. *Work that has nothing to do with your job.*

Most men, if you ask them to divide a man's time into three parts, will say work, sleep, and play or recreation. If you say they have named only two, they will be frankly puzzled. But you may win them over if you argue that sleep and play are both forms of recreation, of relaxation and refreshment. What then, they will say, is the third division of a man's time? If you say *leisure*, they will be baffled.

Our misconception of the life cycle which underlies the frustration of retirement—in turn rests upon our misconception of the nature of leisure. Leisure is not the same as play, nor is it the same as sleep. Leisure is not the state of having nothing to do; that is properly called vacation—when we are vacant of occupation or purpose. Consider the derivation of the word “leisure.”

It stems from a word meaning to *be permitted*, like the modern French word, *laisser*, to allow. To have leisure is to be permitted to do something, to be freed from the bodily demands of labor and sleep so that we may do something and be something that the man of labor and sleep may not do or be. How different the ultimate senses of these three terms—vacation; recreation; leisure! Emptiness; renewal or recharging of strength; and positive freedom to do something!

To do what?

Until our own time (and in most of the world even

now) leisure was the exclusive privilege of that small part of society that did not have to divide its whole time between subsistence labor and recreation (the latter largely in the form of sleep). Secure in his subsistence—like the retired American today—the man of leisure was permitted to substitute another sort of activity for that of subsistence labor. But to substitute play was a kind of superfluity, an excess; for play, like sleep, is relaxation or recreation. To be sure, there were rich playboys. The uniform lesson of their lives is that an excess of play palls—just as an excess of play, however sedate, palls on the retired American today.

As long as most men were slaves to subsistence labor, and to re-creation for the purpose of more subsistence labor, the leisure class was bound to be judged by the example of its members who misused their leisure time for play. Without the playboy—the sybaritic idler—as the symbol of the leisure class, the democratic revolution could never have occurred. Given this symbol, the democratic revolutionaries had only to cite the righteous dictum of the Bible: “He who will not work, neither shall he eat.”

Lost in the shuffle was the image of the true man of leisure. This was the man who, through fortune or genius, was freed from the necessity to produce the world’s material goods so that he might labor in the production of the world’s mental and spiritual goods. That these were the higher goods, the proper goods of man, was never doubted. And, while the unleisured masses were revolting against the 12- or 10-hour day, the true man of leisure was working 14 or 16 or 18 hours a day in his study, his laboratory, or his studio.

But the whole of our society is the leisure class. This is what is new in the world. This is the full flower of the democratic revolution plus the industrial and medical revolutions. Before retirement the average American has a day-and-a-half or two days a week free from

subsistence toil *and* from the consuming need for recreation; after 65, 60, or even 55 or 50, he has seven. Nothing like this has ever before been known. And the challenge to the whole leisured society is the same as it was to the leisured few of yore: Shall we misuse the new boon of leisure time for play, and find ourselves bored even before retirement, or use it to produce the higher goods of life and thus *increase* our service to society at the time of life when wisdom is ours to enjoy, to refine, and to share?

Remember that the men whose old age produced their greatest works were those who had been doing that work all their lives. They did not drop one kind of activity at 60 or 65 and begin another; their whole lives were preparation for the fuller life of old age. So, too, the man who has a day and-a-half or two days of leisure time all his life, is, during that time, preparing himself for the time of unbroken leisure. What he does on his days off at 30, 40, or 50, he will do on his years off at 60, 70, or 80. What do we do, you and I, with our free time in middle life? For it is that which we will do, and *have* to do, with our free time in retirement.

Don't let the insurance companies and the pharmaceutical advertisements tell you how to live the best and most useful years of your life. It isn't their business. Their business is to tell you how to come into possession of those years in physical and financial health—not what to do with them when you have them, still less how to prepare yourself for them. Don't let them make a superannuated playboy out of you, an old fool instead of a young one.

When Clarence Randall retired as board chairman of Inland Steel to become economics adviser to the President of the United States, he said that this was his graduation day, *now* could he put his learning to use. When, at last, you can turn from making a living to living, to doing work of greater benefit to yourself and

society than earning money, be sure that you are ready to begin.

There is only one way you can be sure that, when you retire, you will be ready to begin, and that is by continuing your education all of your adult life. For nature intends that our intellect should never stop growing, but we must aid it by the stimulation of a liberal education. Job-training is not liberal education. Handiwork and household hobbies are not liberal education. Liberal education is the study of the fundamental principles and problems of human life and human society. I don't care what materials you use to continue your education, but I confess my prejudice for a study of the great books, in which the analysis and argument of all great ideas are classically embodied.

An active interest in great books and great ideas is the best solution I have seen to the problem of later-life boredom. Mr. Jones, a retired railroad engineer, heard his daughter and some of her fellow-members of a Great Books Discussion Group arguing over the *Peloponnesian War* of Thucydides. Mr. Jones was drawn into the discussion, and then into the Great Books program for adults. Only then, he says now, did he discover what he had been suffering from; he had been suffering, literally, from *nothing*. Now, like so many retired laymen, he is the leader of an active discussion group.

Jones is not his real name. But Meacham is hers. Ten years ago Mrs. C. W. Meacham was an elderly widow in Des Moines when she heard about the Great Books program. First she joined a library discussion group. Then she volunteered her services in the administrative part of the program. For two or three years she served in the libraries—without pay—in Des Moines, Seattle, and Los Angeles. One day she packed up and went to Germany. She had spent her childhood in a German-speaking community in Iowa, and it occurred to her that she might serve democracy by introducing the great books

and the great ideas into German adult education. Today she directs a nation-wide educational program in a country 5000 miles from the city in which, 10 years ago, she had nothing to do.

Of course, the Great Books program is not the only way to prepare yourself for the profession of retirement. You will benefit greatly from any kind of work which is a challenge to that part of you which continues growing after retirement age—your intellect. You needn't read only the Great Books, but any good books, and you might organize or join groups to discuss them. Evening art classes or music appreciation courses are a good idea. An active interest in political affairs is something you will never be too old to have, and, with your wisdom gleaned from experience, you will be helping democracy by your participation. Or, teachers are needed in every branch of learning and you can undoubtedly find a niche where your services will be appreciated. The object is to keep your mind active in any way that appeals to you, for, as long as you do so, life will be interesting to you, and you will be interesting to others.

We have just begun to inquire scientifically into the problems of retirement. A decade or two ago there was nothing to support the thesis I have been advancing here; nothing but common sense and the record of those glorious old men who, freed, as one of them says in Plato's *Republic*, from the "furious master," youth, were at last able to spend their days in convivial learning, in reading, writing, and conversation. As they approached death they lived ever more fully, enlarging their own vision, that of their countrymen, and of posterity.

Now the sociologists are completing their first studies of retirement. Uniformly they support the medical conclusion that "we don't wear out; we rust out." Prof. Lawrence D. Corey of the University of Chicago recently reported to the Tenth Annual Gerontological Congress that successful adjustment to retirement

appeared to depend upon how long the individual had gone to school; the better the education, the better the adjustment.

The Greek word for leisure is the root of our English word for "school." The man of leisure is the man who is free to go to school, two or three evenings a week all his laboring life, and then to be graduated, at the very peak of his powers, to the kind of noble and ennobling labor that society so badly needs, the labor of the inquiring intellect focused upon the great issues of life. Grow old we must, but only in this way can we grow old gracefully. Only in this way are the vision of the poet and the intention of nature both realized: "The best is yet to be—the last of life, for which the first was made."

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

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR

Dear Fellow Members:

This link will take you to the electronic journal, "Teaching Great Books."

<http://teachinggreatbooks.pepperdine.edu>

So far there are two volumes. Both are marvelous resources for Great Books discussion leaders and Great Books students.

—Do you have an article that might be appropriate for a third volume?

—Do you know anyone who might appreciate knowing about this site?

If your answer is "yes" to either or both of these

questions, please let me know: mgose@pepperdine.edu

The first volume is the prototypical journal and includes Adler's essay on "How to Mark a Book". The journal intends to house articles that have implications for Great Books reading, writing, speaking, listening skills, as well as statements about liberal education and the experience of studying Great Books and Great Ideas. The second volume includes, e.g., an essay on Liberal Education by Eva Brann, and articles on inquiry by John Krugler, Peter Kalkavage, and John Pustejovsky.

I would appreciate any advice any readers have regarding letting Great Books discussion leaders know of this resource.

Best regards,

Michael D. Gose, Blanche E. Seaver Professor of Humanities and Teacher Education

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