

Surviving Retirement: Avoiding Turmoil, Traumas, Tantrums, and Other Transitional Problems

by Paul K. Fox, PMEA Retired Members Coordinator

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How do most retirees face the tumultuous passage of saying farewell to full-time employment?

According to psychologist/consultant Dr. Yvette M. Guerrero of the University of California, San Francisco: “Compelling and challenging, the retirement process involves transitioning to a new identity. This process can become self-empowering and lead to creative ways to self-reinvent and thrive.”

The research of counseling psychologist Dr. Nancy K. Schlossberg is worth reading. She identifies the following approaches to retirement, as quoted from <http://www.apa.org/research/action/retire.aspx>:

- **Continuers** who continued using existing skills and interests;
- **Adventurers** who start entirely new endeavors;
- **Searchers** who explore new options through trial and error;
- **Easy Gliders** who enjoy unscheduled time letting each day unfold;
- **Involved Spectators** who care deeply about the world, but engage in less active ways;
- **Retreaters** who take time out or disengage from life.

Any or all of these are perfectly “okay!” It’s really all about “different strokes for different folks.”

As a very recent practitioner of this journey, I have one observation concerning *former* Type-A super-scheduled personalities (a.k.a music teachers) facing this momentous life-style change:

You either love retirement or hate it!

In his book, *The Retiring Mind*, Dr. Robert P. Delamontagne estimates that “50% of retirees will suffer some form of acute emotional distress. This is potentially a very large problem given the fact that 10,000 people are becoming eligible for Social Security every day for the next 20 years in the US alone.”

Dr. Yvette Guerrero shares the likely (good and bad) emotions during the pre- and post-retirement evolution:

- Excitement
- Joy
- Freedom
- Accomplishment
- Peace of mind
- Optimism
- Ambivalence
- Sadness (re: loss /change in professional identity, collegial community)
- Anxiety (angst)
- Pessimism

So, try to dodge a few of the potential “mental health issues” along the way. (These are *my* “pet-peeves.”)

Amnesia or feeling a loss of identity:

- “No one remembers who I am.”
- “They took everything away from me” (ID badge, e-mails, master keys).

This is possibly followed by the dreaded ego-centric **inferiority complex**: “What happened to all the activity?” or “Where is everybody?” or “Who am I?” or secretly thinking “Why am I not the center of attention anymore?”

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Someone wise once told me not to be alarmed when even your own music students forget you after two or three years. Not having you in class, nor hearing your name on the public address, nor seeing you in the halls, nor watching you direct an assembly, ensemble or musical, it is perfectly natural that your identity will likely fade away as the “graduates” leave and the new enrollees enter the building.

However, since I was still working with the marching band (and had been involved in so many other extra-curricular activities), I figured I might have a year or two before disappearing into obscurity. Surprise! One month from stepping down, I was walking my dogs at the high school and came upon a junior girl and her mother in a “driving training session.” I shouted out “hello” (my yorkie-poo didn’t even bark), and the girl immediately rolled up her windows and moved away... “Stranger danger?” A few minutes later, when the opportunity presented itself (mom and driver switched seats), I introduced myself and received a blank look when I reassured them, “I just retired from this school. Surely you remember Mr. Fox?” Nope. Don’t expect it. Anyway, there *are* advantages to losing the spotlight and becoming totally anonymous!

Delusions of grandeur or superiority complex: “Let me help train my replacement” (in my image).

Big mistake! What’s that saying? “It’s like trying to teach a pig to sing... it just wastes your time and annoys the pig.” The newcomer to your former position is not you, and probably does not want your blow-by-blow assistance. You will only become frustrated when he/she goes his/her own way, does his/her own thing, leaving you (appropriately) on the sidelines mumbling to yourself “but that’s not what’s supposed to happen!”

Denial: “I’m not retired.”

This malady is very common. Unless you have simply changed jobs and moved on to new full-time employment (teaching at the college, etc.), you *are* retired. PSSERs and your mother said so! Retirement is a “state of mind,” and now is it the time to “smell the roses,” stop living in the past, and start filling and fulfilling “bucket lists” of new goals and “fun things I always wanted to do!”

Sitting around the house isn’t just bad for your mental health; it’s bad for your physical fitness as well. **Phobias** and “the fear of the unknown” limit some retiree’s willingness to “venture out,” go outside his/her “comfort zone,” and try new things – like volunteer, sign-up to do charity work, visit family and friends in other places, share your hobbies and skills with the community, go back to school to learn something new, etc.

Of course, retiring from music education does mean you embrace avenues of creative self-expression with greater frequency – singing, playing an instrument, conducting community/church groups, composing, teaching private lessons, etc.

Finally, try to avoid forming any new **addictions:** too much TV watching, sitting around, over-eating, etc.

Dr. Amit Sood, author of *The Mayo Clinic Guide to Stress-Free Living*, writes “This a time of enormous change. You are leaving your job and friendships with colleagues and finding new things to do.” Sood recommends many stress-reduction strategies: “Realize that your brain’s reward center likes variety, so give yourself a variety of experiences.” He adds, “Let your best friends not be the TV, refrigerator or couch. Let your best friends be real people, books and sports shoes.”

“Treat your first year in retirement as if you are ‘interning’ to give yourself time to readjust and set new expectations,” he concludes. “Find meaning in new passions, including possibly using your work skills in a new job or volunteer work.”

Okay, class... any questions?

What should I do with 100 pounds of old lesson plans?

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Downsize and throw-out. Unless you are teaching college methods courses, you will never need them! Besides, you could make a little extra spending money participating in a garage sale or flea market selling all of those old file cabinets, folders, binders, and other school supplies. Really, how many staple removers or pairs of scissors do you really need?

What is this fascination about getting old?

I love the blogs by Sydney Lagier (see <http://retiredsyd.typepad.com/about.html>) who sums up the “age thing” with the following in her article *Retirement: A Full-Time Job – The Unfettered Pursuit of Happiness*:

“There are three phases of aging. The first phase is where you feel young because you actually are young. The third phase is where you feel old because you actually are old. And the phase in-between is where you feel young but everyone thinks you need to sit down.”

What concrete advice can you offer me in preparation for the big “R?”

1. Continue your membership in PMEA (and enjoy those discounts – lower cost membership fee, almost-free registrations to conferences, etc.).
2. Peruse articles, past eNEWS issues, and other resources posted on the Retired Members’ section under the “Specialty Areas” link of the PMEA website: <http://www.pmea.net/retired-members/>.
3. Check out these additional websites for more advice on weathering the transition:
 - <http://www.fool.com/investing/general/2014/09/27/3-tips-for-surviving-your-first-year-of-retirement.aspx>
 - <http://health.howstuffworks.com/wellness/aging/retirement/10-tips-for-adjusting-to-retirement.htm#page=0>
 - <http://www.wikihow.com/Survive-Retirement>
4. Here’s your reading list (you are required to read at least one of these):
 - *How to Retire Happy, Wild and Free* by Ernie Zelinski (my personal favorite)
 - *How to Love Your Retirement: The Guide to the Best of Your Life* by Barbara Waxman
 - *Retire Smart, Retire Happy: Finding Your True Path in Life* by Nancy K. Schlossberg, EdD
 - *With Purpose: Going from Success to Significance In Work and Life* by Ken Dychtwald, Ph.D.
 - *The Healing Journey Through Retirement: Your Journal of Transition and Transformation* by Phil Rich, Dale S. Fetherling, and Dorothy Madway Sampson
 - *My Next Phase: The Personality-Based Guide to Your Best Retirement* by Eric Sundstrom, Michael Burnham, and Randy Burnham
 - *The Joy of Retirement: Finding Happiness, Freedom, and the Life You’ve Always Wanted* by David Borchard
5. To review past PMEA News articles and other helpful hints, go to the WordPress site “retirement resources” authored by your PMEA State Retired Member Coordinator (Paul Fox) at <https://paulkfoxusc.wordpress.com/category/retirement-resources/>.

We always close with “happy trails, retirees!” Best wishes on the preparation to and realization of a safe, happy, healthy, and fulfilling retirement! Please keep in touch: paulkfox.usc@gmail.com.

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