

An “S” on My Chest

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Holiday Observance
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On October 31st of this year, at quarter's end, I became, by choice, superannuated. Webster gives these definitions for the term: "Retired or ineffective because of advanced age [as in]: *Nothing is more tiresome than a superannuated pedagogue*' (Henry Adams): Outmoded; obsolete [as in]: *'superannuated laws'*." For further context, the irreverent on-line URBAN DICTIONARY offers a definition of the term "superannuated flatus," that is: "old fart."

I prefer to go back to the root of the word. Super annuated. Above years. Beyond time – or perhaps, above time. Going from the state of time-starved to time-rich. That change needs counsel. What better place to seek counsel on *this* subject than at The Literary Club, and what better time than so near the solstice, and the renewal of light? And so, I do!

The Club's advice could not sound like that of a Cassandra of superannuation, a recently retired lawyer who buttonholed me on Government Square to warn that "doing nothing is not conducive to longevity," and who offered the prospect of "ROMEIO" lunches – "ROMEIO" being the acronym for "retired old men eating out." I have demurred to that so far.

One would think that being without duties, without the demands of a profession, or of clients, would be unalloyed bliss. And so it would be, I think, but for THE question: "**What are you going to do?**" It's a fair question, usually well

meant. Its crux is this: “What are you going to do now that those five-sevenths of your days belong to you, not to someone, or something, else?”

According to two earnest ex-P&G’ers, who wrote a book revealing “10 Secrets for Creating and Living a Fulfilling Retirement,” I am behind in answering the question. I have not created a capital-P Plan for retirement activities. I have not written a personal values statement. I am not scheduling quarterly updates of progress against my plan – although not having a plan could make that a quicker job. In sum, I have not treated retirement as project-work on par with launching a new variant of Tide or Olay.

Maybe this will suffice for a values statement for now: I will never, ever, believe I am qualified to tell strangers how to live. And no matter how delicious it looks, I will never post on Facebook a picture of something I’m about to eat.

For an action plan, Goethe offered this positive agenda: “One ought, every day at least, to hear a little song, read a good poem, see a fine picture, and if it were possible, to speak a few reasonable words.” That last will no doubt prove a great challenge.

But back to those two P&G’ers and their “How to retire” program with its ten secrets. What arcane way has ten secrets? Seven is the number of cardinal virtues, deadly sins, pillars of wisdom, wonders of the world. Buddha’s noble

path was eightfold. Ten secrets to fulfilling retirement? It's too daunting. It almost seems like ... work!

Daunted or not, in society, the superannuated must answer *the* question. A once-“retired” friend (who went on to teach philosophy at Stanford) advised: “You have to have the right cocktail-party answer to the question, ‘What are you going to do?’ An answer like, ‘I’m going to walk the dog,’ like so-and-so was using, may be honest, but it is not *acceptable*.”

Experience has shown this good advice. Terse or flippant answers don't satisfy the questioner: “Nothing,” not only doesn't inform, it's, at base, false. So is the answer “Whatever I want.” Answers in variation on Blaise Pascal's observation that all unhappiness traces to not knowing how to sit quietly in a room fail for like reasons.

My cocktail-party answer therefore became, “We're thinking of moving to Ashland, Oregon.” This response nearly came to grief when a well-informed questioner rejoined with “Ashland! The Shakespeare Festival! Will you take part in the Shakespeare Festival?” For a brief moment, I had to consider whether my true life's work, now about to start, was to play Lear's fool. But, after all, I'm retired ... and all that memorizing!

My philosophy-teacher friend also had this advice on planning for retirement: “Let it come to you.” Another retired friend advised to take six months without big plans, as a form of decompression. Gentlemen, I have a plan.

Of useful preparation for the sensations and attitudes of the superannuated, the best came from an out-of-the-way source: Charles Lamb’s 1825 essay, “The Superannuated Man.” Lamb, as you know, in addition to being an essayist, poet, playwright and wit (despite the stutter that kept him from a church career), worked for thirty-three years in the accounting office of the East India Company.

Lamb also cared for his elder sister Mary, who had killed their mother and wounded their father in a manic fit, and spent good chunks of the rest of her life in asylums. Mary got out in her better times, on Charles’s responsibility as guardian – remarkable, given that Charles had himself been hospitalized for mental illness. Together, they wrote the children’s work TALES FROM SHAKESPEARE, and hosted the London literati of the day: Wordsworth, Shelley, Leigh Hunt, and Charles’s boyhood friend and schoolmate, Coleridge. In such company, Lamb heard Wordsworth boast that he could “write like Shakespeare if he had a mind to.” Lamb reportedly noted, “So it’s only the mind that’s lacking.”

“The Superannuated Man” offers the reflections of an accounting- clerk pensioned from a London firm after thirty-seven years. The clerk first describes the duration of those years – of waking at night, in terror of some imagined error;

of having one free day a week – Sunday – to himself; of the dreariness of that day, with no shops open, no busy faces to amuse “the idle man who contemplates them ever passing by,” rather, only the unhappy countenances of those who, like him, had “lost almost the capacity of enjoying a free hour.”

Of his one week of yearly vacation, “before [he] had a taste of it, it was vanished.” He was at his desk again, “counting upon the fifty-one tedious weeks that must intervene before another snatch would come.”

From this life, he found himself in an instant, and without forewarning, liberated. His employers, seeing him worn down, settled on him a generous lifetime pension of two-thirds of his wages, and sent him off at once. He’s at first stunned, as by “passing out of Time into Eternity.” He has to learn to savor the pleasures of reading or strolling whenever he chooses, rather than needing to grasp for those pleasures in the few moments open to them.

After his first shock of timelessness, the clerk felt the illusion that a huge span of time had passed since he had left the counting-house. His work-mates seemed as if long-dead to him. To dispel that, he visits them in his old workplace. The old jokes no longer come off. He resents a colleague’s having his old desk and hat-peg. He feels guilty for having left: “I had violently broken the bonds between us. It was at least not courteous.”

But in a fortnight, he not only no longer misses his “old chains,” he feels as if he had enjoyed his present liberty forever. The days of the week, which had before each been characterized by its proximity to, or distance from, his Sunday day of rest, had become the same. The very idea of for-gain, purposeful action came to seem an alien, not-human state.

I must confess that all of Lamb’s essay is ringing true – save only for the part about all days of the week seeming like. False. They are not. On Saturdays and Sundays, the cafes, shops and byways are crowded with the unfortunates looking to make the most of their two-sevenths of time of their own. Poor souls.

Here is Lamb’s clerk’s peroration, which is so apt as almost eerie:

I am no longer -----, clerk to the firm of, etc. I am Retired Leisure. I am to be met with in trim gardens. I am already come to be known by my vacant face and careless gesture, perambulating at no fixed pace, nor with any settled purpose. I walk about; not to and from. They tell me, a certain *cum dignitate* air, that has been buried so long with my other good parts, has begun to shoot forth in my person. I grow into gentility perceptibly. When I take up a newspaper, it is to read the state of the opera. *Opus operatum est*. I have done all that I came into this world to do. I have worked task-work, and have the rest of the day to myself.

And as for me, and spending my leisure time, I could write -- like Shakespeare --
if I had a mind to.