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REFLECTIONS FROM “THE OTHER SIDE” (PART 2)

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A Few Offerings for Transitioning into Retirement

In this paper, I offer a few thoughts on where I am today as I am still transitioning into retirement and navigating the country of old age. These are strategies that are serving me well at the present time. I've always loved that quote by Ralph Waldo Emerson that said [“The purpose of life is not to be happy. It is to be useful, to be honorable, to be compassionate, to have it make some difference that you have lived and lived well”](#). Making decisions that help you lead a fulfilling life in retirement requires intentionality. That is, seeking out what makes you feel useful and worthwhile and intentionally taking steps to enact what it takes to move in that direction.

Meaning and Purpose

Find something that gives you meaning and purpose and look for ways to be involved in that. As an academic and researcher in aging and mental health, I learned many years ago from the older adults in studies I conducted on suicide, meaning and aging, that having meaning and purpose in life was key to living, and that life without hope, without that meaning and purpose, was frequently a precursor to suicide. This still holds true today. David Irvine, an internationally sought-after speaker and mentor talks about finding your own sense of purpose and suggests that [“when you make a personal commitment to make the world around you a better place, it uplifts people”](#) (p. 205). He advocates that when people work to enlarge the lives of others, their own lives will be enlarged and will provide that sense of purpose.

Maintain an Attitude of Hope

The importance of hope has been well established in the academic literature. Hope plays a key role in physical and psychological health throughout the life course, and in helping people have a sense of meaning and purpose (Moore, 2021, p. 35). It can lift people from the depths of life's most challenging circumstances. [“Hope is amazing. You can't touch it, but you can definitely feel it. You can't physically see it by itself, but you can hold it and carry it. Hope doesn't weigh anything, but it can ground you and it will anchor you”](#) (Jevne & Miller, 2020, p. 10). Imagine having something this powerful to accompany you each day. Hope is possible if you seek it out and look for ways to incorporate it intentionally into your life. Look for ways to nurture your hope and keep reminders nearby. Jevne and Miller (2019) suggest to search for what gives you meaning in your life and [“right next to it you will find what gives you hope”](#) (p. 59). Meaning, purpose, and hope are inextricably linked and are vital to life itself.



Express Gratitude:

After experiencing a summer with two melanoma surgeries last year, feeling very fearful and wondering if I would even be around the following year, I have come to appreciate that each day we are given is a gift. And how I choose to live each day is up to me. I am trying to learn to live from a place of hope rather than fear. I am learning that my body has frailties that I thought would not be mine to claim but they have sneaked up on me. On the other hand, the discovery of some of those very frailties has given me opportunities to take steps to minimize or mitigate their effects. I am grateful that my back surgery from 20 years ago held very well until recently. I went from hardly being able to walk from my car to my office, to standing on the summit of Mount Kilimanjaro (the highest mountain in Africa) a few years after the surgery along with climbing several other summits. And I am grateful that there are treatments that still help to manage some ongoing back issues. These may seem like big events, but we can be ever so grateful for smaller things too, like a grandchild slipping their hand through yours when you are going for a walk, or a stranger coming over and saying, “let me help you clean the snow off your car”. Acknowledging the large and small gratitudes in our lives and recording them at the end of the day can help to turn our thoughts towards things that are good and right in the world rather than everything that is wrong. This past couple of years with Covid and all of its challenges certainly brings home the need to practice gratitude in the midst of challenging times.

Celebrate:

Celebrate everything you can. Birthdays, anniversaries, a bike ride, a new baby, coffee with a friend, an afternoon of painting with your mother, a phone call with a child or grandchild. All of these are reason to celebrate. I love it when my birthday seems to extend over several days and sometimes even weeks - a dinner out, a phone call from an old friend, a card in the mail. There are so many reasons to celebrate. Seek out reasons and celebrate those events. They may be grand and elaborate but some of the most meaningful celebrations can be small and quiet, the sharing of a meal, or meeting a friend in a parking lot for coffee and conversation.

Be Kind and Gracious:

Even small acts of kindness can make a big difference in someone’s life. A kind word or gesture, the act of doing something for another has the potential draw someone to hope again, or to help someone struggling to see the possibility of light at the end of the tunnel.

Be Creative:

There is a wonderful book authored by Shaun McNiff called *Art Heals: How Creativity Cures the Soul*. It shows there is a growing body of research that recognizes the importance of creativity in maintaining health and fostering healing. I will always remember the day (while I was still working) that the Dean came into our faculty meeting and challenged our group to “learn something new”. I decided then I would learn to play the ukulele. I began looking for ways to do that and found a group in my community that had recently started up. A retired couple were volunteering their time to teach adults to play ukulele. Six years and five ukuleles later, I play weekly in a band called High Strung with



upwards of 100 other ukulele players. This group has offered fun, camaraderie, learning, and giving back to others through concerts in long-term care and hospital settings. Creative practices have become an integral part of the artist side of me, along with quilting, painting, and photography.

Even prior to retirement, you can try to find a creative outlet that you enjoy and look for ways to incorporate that in some aspect of your work. My love of music and photography inspired me to develop multimedia shows that I could use in my teaching. After retirement, these practices have led to friendships, and opportunities to share creative experiences with other like-minded individuals. To spend an afternoon painting is a gift. I enrolled in water colour painting classes a few years ago when I was recovering from a knee replacement thinking it would give me something to do while recovering. But it did far more than that. For those two hours every week, it allowed me to experience what I described as a rest for my brain. It took my focus to a place that seemed like a retreat. Regardless of how tired I felt when the class started, I always felt renewed and relaxed when I finished the class. I am still taking lessons, and two or three hours of painting still has the ability to calm and soothe my soul.

Take the time to learn something new. Take the time to develop a creative practice and try something you think you might enjoy. You could be amazed at the results. Last year as a new retiree, I enrolled in a drawing class (with the idea that it might help me with my water-colour painting). This was certainly an endeavor in humility. But there was so much to learn, and I was amazed to see where I started and how I progressed.

The first class assignment was to draw a self-portrait. Without having a clue what to do, I tried my best and came up with the following.



Now is this really what a 69 year old retired woman looks like?



10 weeks later, the same assignment produced a much more realistic likeness (cold sore and all) after we were instructed to "draw what you see not what you think you see."



But what I really was most proud of in that class was the special project that I worked on. I chose to draw a picture of my youngest grandson and I felt that I was able to put all my learning into that drawing and produce Sebastien as he really looks.

Novelist, playwright, and poet Julia Cameron (2021) suggests a weekly artist date to foster and inspire creativity. She describes this as “is a once-weekly solo expedition to do something that enchants or interests you”. All of these creative endeavours help to create a sense of accomplishing something, of creating a work of art (some better than others). They engage your senses and intellect in meaningful ways.

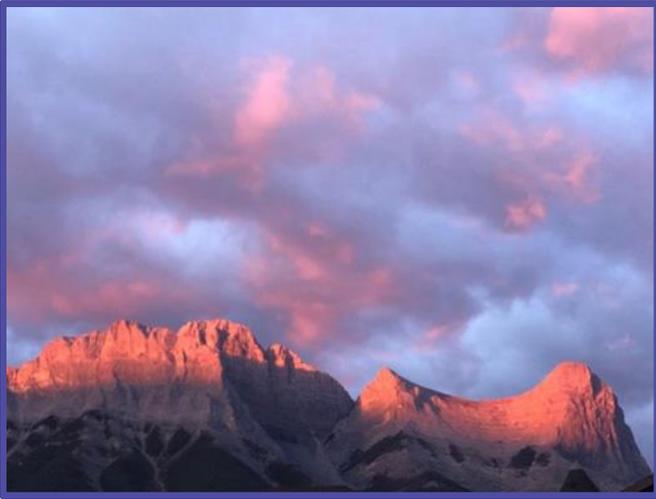
Make Meaningful Connections

Spend time with the people you care about. Get to know your grandchildren. Establish meaningful connections through your activities. Research has shown us the importance of having meaningful connections as older adults to mitigate against feelings of loneliness and isolation.

Be Kind to your Body

Even in the two years since retirement, I have noted some declines in my physical abilities. Where I used to be able to scramble up a mountain side, it is now more challenging. Joints complain, sometimes the will to do something is stronger than my actions. Exercise physiologists say, “use it or lose it”. Getting active, getting physical is critical in helping to maintain function. While Covid has offered up many challenges, one of the benefits has been a rise in the use of technology to find creative ways to carry on many activities. Zoom has enabled many older individuals to participate in activities they had not previously done through the use of online classes. Many communities have developed ways to reach out to people and offer opportunities to take part in walking programs, fitness classes, and a range of graduated activities. Look for these opportunities in your community and take part. Regular physical activity, establishing a good relationship with your physician and taking time to care for your physical health are important.

As I navigate my way into this country of old age where I have recently taken up citizenship, I am a student all over again. I embrace the opportunities I am being given to learn about life in this country and the kinds of things that can help me continue to be a citizen worthy of residency.



Sharon spoke about taking time in part one of her article. “I can take time to experience the glory of a sunrise that greets the awakening day”, as Sharon’s photo above illustrates.

Thank you, Sharon - from the Alberta Association on Gerontology.

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