



Life Intermissions

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My friend George worked for a Fortune 500 company for 30 years and “retired” in his early 50s. A year off and out was enough to recharge him, so he decided to start a new nonprofit to deal with racial tensions in our city. A decade later, he handed the reins to a new director and “retired” again. A year later (you guessed it), he began his third act with a foundation dealing with macro-level cultural problems.

What if, instead of drawing an end to your working life, you need only an intermission?

A 2014 study by Age Wave for Merrill Lynch called *Work in Retirement: Myths and Motivations* lends some interesting language to the discussion of the place of work in today’s retirement discussion. One term that caught my eye was the idea of a “career intermission.” For years, I have been cautioning retirees who think they want a “forever” break from work that what they really need is a decompression period. According to this study, 52% of retirees are doing just that.

Instead of leaving the workplace entirely, over half of today’s retirees are taking some time out to recharge and possibly retool for their next “act.” As we discussed in an earlier column this year, the highest percentage of entrepreneurs today are from the retirement age group. Roughly one-third of all retirees fall into three categories:

1. Those who cycle between work and leisure (33%);
2. Those who engage in part-time work (35%); and
3. Those who never work for pay again (28%).

Individuals are becoming more comfortable with the idea of moving in and out of employment—or possibly just ratcheting down the intensity of their level of work without ever actually discontinuing completely. Not only do they want recharge, but also to test the waters of the workless lifestyle, to contemplate what other types of engagements might satisfy them, and to attend to other responsibilities in life (like caregiving and family).

Psychologist Nancy K. Schlossberg came up with the phrase “psychological portfolio” to help people think through the idea that not only are they leaving something when they retire but that they are beginning something new. In a study of 100 retirees, she found that retirement is not one but many transitions, and that people’s ability to cope with these depends on the following:

1. The role of work and family in their lives;
2. The timing of their retirement;
3. The degree to which work has been satisfying for them and the degree to which retirement has been planned for;

4. The expectations they have about retirement;
5. The degree to which a meaningful life is established for them;
6. Their health; and
7. Their sense of financial security.

For most of us, there will be many question marks around these items, and the answers may not be immediate. Many retire—and feel the timing is off. Others have expectations of a leisure life that becomes rote and joyless over time. Others feel their health is eroding because of inactivity, and still others start thinking that part-time engagement and a little extra cash make them feel a lot better about their situation.

Schlossberg identified the following attitudes common to newbies at retirement:

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

Holes In The Bucket

During your intermission period—while you're recharging and refreshing your life—you may want to address some items on your bucket list. Please keep in mind that the bucket list items are best pursued intermittently. As one retiree told me, "I was so excited about getting after my bucket list; the problem was that it didn't take as long as I thought to empty the bucket. Then I asked myself, 'What do I do now?'"

With perhaps 30 to 40 years ahead of us in the so-called retirement years, it would do us all some good to reframe the discussion. Instead of characterizing it as the "End of work/beginning of retirement," it might be better to describe it as "Act 1/Intermission/Act 2/Intermission/Act 3."

Your intermission period is a time to measure your life and decide what your priorities are. One caveat: An intermission that's too long can be counterproductive. I've talked to many who rued getting out for too long and saw their job connections disappear or move on. Their skills and industry acumen slipped just enough to be out of rhythm with changes happening in their fields. If you don't plan on going back to the industry where you spent your career, this is nothing to worry about. But if you are going to re-enter familiar territory, you may want to make sure your intermission doesn't run into overtime.

Those who have tried out the intermission lifestyle seem to be happier when they do re-enter work either full or part time. Most say their new engagements are more fun and fulfilling—and less stressful and boring. This may come from a refreshed attitude, or it may be they have figured out they actually like being engaged in productive activities. Could it be that humans are wired to reap fulfillment from being involved in productive and meaningful work? Just as it did for George, whose contributions have been significant, a good intermission will give you some time to figure it out.

Mitch Anthony is the author of *The New Retirementality (Wiley)*, now in its fourth edition.