

## THE R-WORD

I was at a holiday party last year, the professional New York kind where people you've just met will be looking over your shoulder for someone more important to talk to, and even if you're in a full body cast friends and acquaintances will sidle up and ask, "So what are you working on?"

As an experiment, I started to say I was "retired" — I may have actually mumbled the whole word, even though I have been loath to use it or to face the fact that it is an increasingly accurate, and ultimately inevitable, description of my professional status. What a mistake. You'd have thought I'd just confessed to testing positive for Ebola. Patronizing nods of checked panic. Sorrowful looks of pity and disappointment. Abrupt discoveries of drinks needing refreshment.

For a while, I thought this obvious social impediment might explain my longstanding aversion to what many people, citing an apparently apocryphal Hemingway quote, call "the ugliest word in the language." Of course, it's not the word "retirement" that repulses but the status it connotes — the status of no longer having the self-definition of a professional identity, of no longer mattering to the degree that one ever mattered at all.

When the father of my friend Blaine retired after a long career as a welder who'd worked on the Grand Coulee Dam, he was proud to call himself retired. His changed status did not unravel his sense of himself, and he might have rightly looked with scorn at callus-free former professionals rueing their inability to swap shoptalk at holiday parties. If you spent your life hanging Sheetrock or emptying bedpans or teaching fifth graders or being shot at, it's hard to imagine why "retirement" wouldn't be the prettiest word in the language.

But if you have had a job you loved, and your goal was always the work itself, what sociologists call the "retirement transition process" entails a certain amount of mourning and a lot of tricky, even torturous, psychological adjustments. Thanks to increased life expectancies and the advent of benefits like Social Security, our period of post-employment life is likely to be much longer than our forebears' was. In the early 1900s, some 65 percent of American men were still in the labor force at age 65. By

1990 that number had dwindled to 10 percent, and millions of retired workers had the challenge — or perhaps the privilege — of grappling with the psychosocial problem of reconfiguring their identities around something other than what they had done for a living.

Gerontologists have called this chapter the “crown of life,” when we are supposedly free to concentrate on personal fulfillment before the unhappy festivities of the final chapter, which they describe as being characterized by “dependency, decrepitude and death.”

I don’t think I will ever want to call myself retired, no matter how little work I may have. I suppose some of my resistance to the idea comes from skepticism of the tropes associated with it: long-delayed “trips of a lifetime”; clichés about the “golden years” (a term apparently made famous by the developer of the Sun City retirement community outside Phoenix Arizona); ad campaigns of seniors taking bubble baths while waiting for erectile dysfunction pills to kick in. It seems awfully bleak to have postponed the quest for personal fulfillment until you are qualified for Medicare. To be so self-conscious about finally having the chance to “enjoy” life seems almost a retrospective indictment of a rat-race society compensating for the neurotic over-prizing of work itself.

Of course many people continue working after 65 because they can’t afford not to. But as researchers have found, for those who don’t have to work, the desire to keep working in later life reflects the sense of purpose and joy that comes from mastery and self-sufficiency. A 2013 study in the Netherlands correlated the desire to continue working after retirement age with higher levels of education and a background of self-employment. As a writer I am doubtlessly over-attached to a professional role that for decades has been a license to indulge my curiosity and comes with the hope that I will be slightly less stupid tomorrow than I am today.

And yes, I grant there is a bliss in spending the day in your pajamas doing things because you want to, not because you have to. I’m glad to have this post-employment time to practice the saxophone, to write a chapbook of elegies in memory of my parents, to give ignorable advice to my kids, to read all of George Eliot, and even to linger over New York City sewer grates with my Norfolk terrier, Morty, in case a rat pops out. But I resist the idea that I will ever retire and am likely to shun the word until the end, clinging

to the pretense of work not so much for the dwindling remuneration — losing your professional role is easier to absorb when most of the magazines you used to work for have folded — but for the simple reason that I can think of no better way of reckoning with decrepitude and death. What am I working on? I'm working on that.