

## **What Shall I Do When I Grow Up—That is When I Retire . . .**

UWRA member Mary Haywood Metz, Professor Emerita of Educational Policy Studies

(Based on a UWRA Panel presentation at the October 2018 Benefit Fair on life in retirement entitled, “If I Had Known Then What I Know Now”)

**Retirement is a significant life transition.** Often, we see only certain aspects beforehand and fail to see other quite different aspects of it.

**Let’s start with the downside: Retirement entails significant losses.** You will lose a community in which you have participated for many years. No matter how glad your former colleagues may be to see you when you visit, you are not part of their lives. They will greet you in a friendly way, but then they need to get back to that work. (If you continue to work part time in a way that weaves your efforts into the life of your work group, these dynamics will be mitigated in varied degrees.)

You will no longer be engaged in activities that have been important to you, and you will no longer be using skills that have been part of your identity. Some retirees whose work is primarily research continue their research, even if their participation and membership in their work community falls away. But a lot of my retired colleagues found the urgency to keep up with the journals or to write that last book fades much more than they expected when there is no social context supporting and encouraging it.

These changes entail a real loss of social identity, more for some than for others, but to some extent for almost all. Retirement inevitably involves some losses and they often arrive as a surprise.

**The upsides of retirement can also come as a surprise.** Most of us look forward to retirement’s release from daily schedules and deadlines and perhaps from the more trying sides of participation in a work community. But there are other rewards in turning away from our work lives as well. As we are healthier at retirement age than our predecessors generally were, we have the reservoir of energy to explore neglected parts of interests and abilities. I have many colleagues who returned to earlier interests, expanded their participation in what had been a hobby, or developed new talents altogether, often coming to participate in new communities as they did so. Thus, among my neighbors and colleagues I can think of:

- \*A high school English teacher who returned to the love of art her father had forbade her to pursue in college. She developed a small business painting note cards.
- \*A curriculum scholar and research administrator who gave more time to developing his skill as a fiddler, performing and discovering a community around his music.
- \*A political science professor who went to the library in search of new interests, discovered joy in the reading of poetry and then in the writing of it.
- A philosopher who in retirement joined Habitat for Humanity and found rewards in swinging a hammer to create housing for others.

These new activities may or may not call on skills and talents learned in ancillary ways though the course of one's work. In my own case, I left a career of professing sociology of education and, through a series of accidental, incremental steps, found myself leading a group of volunteer political organizers. It was very different work, but the skills I had learned mentoring graduate students were useful in mentoring volunteers. The skills I had developed in doing ethnographic research were helpful in developing relationships in short encounters with voters at their doors.

It is important to note that an organized new interest is not the only path to an active retirement with new identity. One of the retirees I know best has put together an enjoyable life doing the variety of things he likes to do at the pace he likes to do them. He exercises regularly and has found an accidental community of others doing early morning workouts at the gym. On the way to and from the gym he has been developing his skills at capturing his surroundings with a camera, learning how to present a bit of nature, composing photos solely for his own enjoyment. He reads widely in varied subjects and participates in a book club and in community choruses. Retirement does allow one to do what one likes for engagement in the moment, without the drive to produce for others or to develop an identity centered around a particular activity.

## **Stages of Retirement**

For the last two years, I have served on the UWRA Committee on Challenges in Retirement, now combined with another committee to become the Retirement Challenges and Opportunities Committee.

I have learned that the UW Retirement Association provides a stunning array of sessions and activities that educate retirees about financial, cultural, and medical issues, and well as providing opportunities for sociability. One of the things we learned in the committee that dealt with challenges in retirement was that our programming had to take account of the stages of retirement.

The energy and active life of early retirement do not last forever. Our committee recognized the need to address the interests of the "go-go years", the "slow-go" years, and the "no-go" years. As one progresses through these stages both activities and interests change. Productive activities yield somewhat to ones based on appreciation of one's social circle and of art, music, and literature—or perhaps of public issues. And then one must learn to address and cope with the medical issues of aging. In programming for the UWRA, we attempt to address members in these different stages.

The activities listed in the Sifter vary from group trips that can involve a good deal of travel and physical exertion to sessions on end-of-life issues. There are explorations of local artistic exhibitions and activities and there are knowledgeable treatments of market vicissitudes affecting our retirement nest eggs. There are talks about local history and talks about the process of swallowing and the ways it can deteriorate. These offerings speak not only to the variations in our interests but to the varying capacities of our bodies and our minds as we travel through the years of retirement.

My husband and I have recently moved to Oakwood Retirement Community because our children live far away and, though we are in good health, we need a safety net in case of sudden medical problems. Here, we are seeing people who are older than us carve out a life. (We are hovering above and below the age of 80 after 17 and 11 years of retirement.) As we reluctantly enter the 'slow-go" years, we are the young folks here, learning from our elders. We have quickly learned to look past walkers and wizened faces to appreciate the rich stories that our neighbors need to tell and to engage with them in lively conversation about the issues of the day—and the issues of collective past. We see examples of tremendous grace in handling what some have called the role of FIP, "formerly important person". We think we will receive many lessons in facing the challenges of loss that come as one moves into the oldest age groups.

Retirees face unanticipated challenges. Looking back, in many of our cases, we had little idea what our careers would be like before we started them, or little idea what parenting would entail before we faced a helpless, endlessly crying, but precious infant. Similarly, it is hard to know ahead of time what retirement will be like. But just as we rose, more or less, to the challenges of our careers and family roles, most of us rise to the challenges of retirement as they emerge. And this time, we have much more life experience and self-knowledge to bring to the task.