

PREPARING FOR THE LAST FLING

PAPER PRESENTED AT THE SYMPOSIUM *PREPARING FOR THE LAST FLING*
SANDTON, FEBRUARY 1981.

ODELIA H. MULLER

OPSOMMING

Aftrede is 'n verskynsel van die moderne samelewing wat onontkombaar is en die meeste persone onverhoeds oorval. Om te verseker dat dit 'n gelukkige tydperk in sy lewe is, behoort die mens homself vir aftrede voor te berei, soos ook in die geval van sy beroepsrol gebeur. Hierdie voorbereiding is in die eerste plek in die ontwikkeling van 'n toereikende persoonlike lewensfilosofie geleë. Verder moet die persoon nuwe en interessante belangstellings vind waarmee hy sy nuutgevonde tyd kan vul. 'n Vriendekring, sekuriteit en fisiese en emosionele gesondheid is ook van belang.

RETIREMENT — *the last fling* — seems to be a phenomenon peculiar to the present age and culture which is geared to suit the convenience of the social system rather than the needs of the individual. In the Western world alone 291 million people are over the age of 60 and every day 14 thousand individuals, irrespective of their potential contribution to industry, commerce and state, are scheduled to retire.

Retirement is often thought of as synonymous with old age, yet a conclusive definition of old age is elusive — we are all familiar with platitudes such as *you're as old as you feel* and *old age is a state of mind*. However true this may be, the yardstick in determining old age is set out by the World Health Organization as:

Middle age ends at 59

Elderly is from 60 - 74

Aged is 75 years and above

— and with few exceptions, people reaching the age of 60 — 65 years are obliged to retire.

During childhood and adolescence we are guided towards an independent, responsible adult role and in academic settings, we are prepared for our professional roles — but where and when are we prepared for the role of retirement?

The title of this symposium — *Preparing for a Last Fling* — seems to have undertones of desperation about it: *eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow we die*. Retirement, however, could and should be a time of new prospects and wider horizons — provided the individual has made

adequate and purposeful preparation for this.

It would be as well to consider the phenomenon of retirement against a background of the attitudes of society towards the elderly and aged through the centuries.

Older members of society have always received some measure of attention, both positive and negative. Confucius correlates increasing age with increasing respect, while the ancient Chinese believed that attaining old age was an accomplishment worthy of the greatest honour. The Egyptians dreaded old age, and experimented hopefully with potions and rituals to avoid it. The Greeks were divided in their views, with Plato promoting the aged as society's best leaders (one is tempted to speculate on Plato's age at the time!) while Aristotle denied them any role in government affairs. Respect for age is a recurring theme in the Bible, but in spite of the influence of the Church, the plight of the aged in the Dark and Middle Ages was bleak indeed — the aged were the first to be deprived in times of famine and poverty, and the last to benefit during the better times.

With the advent of the industrial revolution, reformers were able, in due course, to enact legislation to prevent exploitation of frail children. No such protection was afforded the frail aged, who either coped with the excessive demands of the industrial society, or else begged in the streets if their families were unable or unwilling to support them.

In our time, prejudices and assumptions about ageing and the elderly bedevil the acceptance of elderly persons as worthy, contributing members of society. Hence the attitudes of society towards the idea of retirement tend to be coloured by ideas of decrepitude and disengagement from society. As members of society, those approaching retirement age may dread its advent for this reason among others.

According to Mitchell¹:

If retirement is to be an acceptable and satisfying phase in the life span, it must provide dignity, security, opportunities for rewarding service and a gratifying social life. The retiree can be helped to the achievement of these ideals, but within the limits of his own capacity, he is responsible for his own destiny. He should be kept aware of this. He is not a ward of society, he is part of society.

Cannon² postulates the ideal for retirement thus:

The ideal solution to the problems of retirement in our society would be for each of us on reaching, say between 55 and 65 (when we ourselves recognize that we can no longer carry on what we are doing successfully or adequately, but still have good health and sufficient income) to spend the rest of our lives doing what we want to do — having prepared ourselves in advance to do it.

Activity is an essential part of our lives and for many the most important and rewarding activity is work — and work tends to assume an

importance out of all proportion to its economic justification. In addition, one's occupational identity is largely responsible for one's social position or the social role attached to that position. If the individual is to make a satisfactory adjustment to a life which no longer has work as its basis, then surely preparation to do this is necessary, associated with a gradual withdrawal, in stages, from his former employment rather than what Toffler³ refers to as *the abrupt, all-to-nothing, ego-crushing change* which is so often the onset of retirement.

It could be reasoned that the inevitability of retirement at a specific age should prepare the individual to accept his turn graciously and gratefully when it arrives, and yet — how quickly time passes as the years advance — how suddenly *ten years hence* may become *tomorrow*; and how abruptly we may each of us be confronted unprepared as likely as not, by imminent retirement.

According to Robert Atchley,⁴ retirees tend to pass through a series of phases and it would be valuable to consider these briefly:

Firstly, the *Remote Phase* which occurs early in the occupational life, when future retirement is vaguely anticipated, but rational preparation is seldom contemplated.

Much later, we encounter the *Near Phase*, when the reality of retirement is evident, preparation for leaving one's job begins, as does fantasy regarding the retirement role.

Immediately following on the retirement event is the *Honeymoon Phase* — a somewhat euphoric period in which the fantasies from the pre-retirement period are tested. Retirees attempt to do everything they had no time for before simultaneously. A variety of factors such as finance and health usually limit this, and greater stability emerges associated with —

the *Disenchantment Phase* which is complete with a feeling of let-down and depression. The more unrealistic the pre-retirement fantasy, the greater the degree of disenchantment.

Subsequently, the *Re-orientation Phase* is fostered by the emergence

of realistic choices and alternative sources of satisfaction are discovered, leading eventually to

the *Stability Phase* where an understanding of the retirement role is achieved, which provides a framework for concern, involvement and action in one's life. Some enter this phase directly after the honeymoon phase. Some never reach it at all.

Obviously the time of life when the individual is most likely to be receptive to the idea of preparation for retirement would be during Atchley's *Near Phase* — but when, in terms of chronological age does this occur? According to the brochure of the British Pre-Retirement Association, pre-retirement education should be geared to two distinct age groups both of whom will fit into this phase — firstly those who have ten years to go to retirement, into whose vocabulary the word *retirement* is just beginning to creep; and secondly those who are already on the brink of retirement for whom little can be done in terms of long-term preparation, but who can be prepared for the *volte face* which retirement will present.

Turning now to the important components of pre-retirement preparation, perhaps the most vital aspect in coming to terms not only with retirement, but with the idea of ageing itself, is the development of a sound and adequate personal philosophy of life.

It is probably not possible to say what this philosophy should be — and it does not really matter, as long as it works for the individual. Morale is always important, and no less so than when the individual is changing his role from that of wage-earner to pensioner.

It is a little late however to start *developing* a philosophy of life at 50 or 55 — so this facet of preparation is a task which really starts in adolescence although it may not reach full maturity until the late 40's or 50's.

A second element which should be considered in preparing for retirement is the necessity for developing new and absorbing interests. There are few of us fortunate enough to have an all-absorbing interest in one particular subject which will fully occupy the newly-acquired freedom of retirement. Women are perhaps more fortunate than men in respect

of interests and hobbies insofar as many of the pastimes of the working years are easily continued after retirement, while men who may have enjoyed participating in sports tend to find that the expense of continued participation may be beyond the fixed income of a retired person.

However, it is also true that retired people may have an inclination to return to work — but this time on a voluntary basis for a welfare organisation in which they have a long-standing or newly-developed interest. This type of involvement has the added advantage of contributing towards meeting two of the universal needs of human beings — the need for esteem and for self-actualization.

A further problem which may be overcome by adequate preparation is the need for congenial friends and associates. The elderly person is always threatened by isolation and loneliness as a result of decreased mobility and possibly defects of hearing and vision. The individual who has always been outgoing and friendly is less likely to be faced with this problem; the foundations of acquiring and retaining friends are laid in the early years rather than in a last-ditch effort in the pre-retirement phase of life. Nevertheless, the fact that the person is likely to join new groups as he develops new interests in preparation for retirement, means that the circle of friends may indeed be expanded at this time.

Other facets which need attention during pre-retirement preparation are the need for suitable accommodation, an adequate income, and good physical and emotional health. The foundations for the latter are laid at the very beginning of life in the ante-natal period, and are nurtured throughout.

From the moment of birth, the individual is getting older — has embarked on the road leading to the *last fling*.

According to Henri Annic: *To know how to grow old is the masterpiece of wisdom, and one of the most difficult chapters in the great art of living.*

References

1. Mitchell, William I. Lay Observation on Retirement In Carp, Frances M. (Ed.) *Retirement*. Behavioural Publication, Inc. New York, 1972.
2. Cannon, Les. A Trades Union leader's View on the Problems of Retirement. In Wright, H. Seric (Ed.) *Solving the Problems of Retirement*. Institute of Directors, London, 1968.
3. Toffler, Alvin. *Future Shock*. Pan Books, London, 1970.
4. Pre-Retirement Association *A Brief Guide to Pre-Retirement Advisory Courses*. The Pre-Retirement Association, London, n.d.