

A Decision for Life

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It was about this time, seven years ago, that I really began to think seriously about retirement. I had told myself that I would probably retire sometime between 55 and 60, and I was then 55. But I had questions. Was retirement the right decision? Was this the right time? What would I do when I retired? Could I afford to retire? I wanted to make a good decision. My wife Charlotte and I had discussed my eventual retirement previously, and she had told me that whatever decision I made was fine with her. She encouraged me to follow the path that spoke to my heart. I had also talked of retirement with my men's group and gotten their support for whatever decision I made.

I had started working when I was a teen-ager, over 40 years before, and hadn't stopped since. Mowing lawns, gardening and delivering papers in the early years; working on a highway crew for several summers; waiting tables and working for chemical companies during my college years; and seven years of college and post-graduate education before I started my first real professional job at age 25. My career as a research scientist and technical manager at Sandia National Labs was interesting and challenging, and I mostly enjoyed the wide variety of assignments I had over the years. I was highly successful—I had well over 100 publications and presentations over the years, I was honored as Distinguished Member of Technical Staff, and I became a technical manager for the last several years there. But it had become stale. Now it seemed that most of my work was chasing research dollars and dealing with personnel issues. The excitement I had felt in the research arena was no longer there. Was it time for a change?

When I headed for the Men's Wellness Conference in October, 1996, my personal agenda was to work toward a decision about retirement. I would focus my attention, during the conference activities, through talks with friends, and during my own personal time, on the question of my retirement and post-retirement activities. The theme of the conference that year was Making a Difference, quite appropriate for the work I had in mind.

During personal reflection early in the weekend, my first "Aha!" was the realization that I had had a highly varied career, with many challenges along the way, all of which I had been able to meet successfully. So why should I expect my response to retirement to be any different or less successful? Aha!

I also had an important conversation with Reynold Bean, a good friend, who talked about his experience of trusting the internal messages he got from whatever source—heart messages as well as head messages. I knew that I needed to pay more attention to the heart messages—I was already good at listening to my head messages.

Because of my own personal agenda for the conference, the theme “Making a Difference” spoke to me of my future life as a retired person. Some of my thoughts were “The best is yet to come” and “It’s up to me.” Ken Betzen and David Johnson gave a highly appropriate (for me) workshop on the “The Challenges of Elder Age,” in which we did a life review and I was introduced to a book, “From Age-ing to Sage-ing,” which was soon to become my bible on elder year activities.

I also spent some time that weekend identifying potential retirement activities, beginning with pottery and gardening, two activities I was already pursuing, and adding in a number of potential service activities, including Habitat for Humanity, Community Center work, church work and mentoring work. I got very excited at the prospect of being of service to others—of making a difference!

The bottom line was that as a result of the personal and interactive work I did at the conference around the issue of retirement, I largely lost the fear I had felt at such a momentous step. As I left that Wellness conference, I felt totally committed to retirement at the earliest possible opportunity. That turned out to be only a few months later, when Sandia offered early retirement to ease an internal budget crunch. I jumped on that opportunity and retired in early 1997!

So seven years later, how do I feel about the decision to retire that I made back then? I now realize that at that time, I made a decision for life—hence the title of this piece. There’s a double meaning to that. I did make a critical life decision—to finish a major part of my life’s work, my primary career of over 30 years, and to begin the next major part of my life, my elder years. But I think I also made a decision to live, to really experience life in new and exciting ways through the freedom that retirement gave me. One of the greatest things about retirement is the tremendous range of opportunities that open up. Assuming that finances are not a major restraint (and with Charlotte still working, we had decided that we were OK financially), the possibilities are endless.

Was my thinking at the conference prophetic? In retirement, did I do the things I had thought I might do? Some things I did, but not all. Pottery, which had been a long-time hobby and part-time business of mine, became my new full-time business. I put heart and soul into learning to be a really good potter, with a focus on water fountains. I surprised myself at how successful I became at this venture. I also got very involved in the local potter’s professional organization, which provided me with social interactions, training, and more opportunities to serve (as president of the group for three years and as board member on two major arts and crafts fairs for several years). I’ve just begun learning a new pottery technique (raku), so it looks like the pottery business will continue to keep me occupied for some time into the future.

On the other hand, I haven't gotten as involved in gardening as I thought I might. Instead, my interests have taken me toward wildlife habitat. For the past three years, I have spent time at the Rio Grande Nature Center State Park as a volunteer. I also have taken on a major development project in my living community, converting 5 acres of our land from agriculture to habitat. This has been highly satisfying, and our pheasants and other small birds and animals seem to appreciate it too!

Sometimes things happen that we can't anticipate. A few years after retirement, I developed a pinched nerve in my neck that left my left arm in pain and my left hand partially paralyzed. Surgery to fuse vertebrae in my neck was successful—my pinched nerve was relieved—but an unfortunate side effect was a paralyzed vocal cord. Even following three years of speech therapy, I now speak with a raspy voice, and I can no longer sing, which had been a strong interest of mine. I have had to grieve these losses, which have had a significant impact on me.

I mentioned earlier that the book *From Age-ing to Sage-ing, A Profound New Look at Growing Older*, by Rabbi Zalman Schachter-Shalomi, had become my bible. When I first read it, it spoke to me in important ways about the role of the elder, and of the potential joys and rewards of one's elder years. Over the first several years after retirement, I went to a number of workshops on the subject of Spiritual Eldering, as taught by Reb Zalman and others. This culminated in a training program that my wife Charlotte and I took to become trained to teach others about Spiritual Eldering, or Conscious Aging as it's sometimes called. This has led to my third career, that of a teacher/counselor/workshop leader in Conscious Aging. I find I get great satisfaction from helping others understand the possibilities that are ahead of us as we transition from our earlier years of work or child rearing into later years with their own rewards. In the course of this work, I've also met a lot of other professional workers who have similar interests in elder activities. We have recently organized a new group called the Conscious Aging Network of New Mexico, to facilitate our working together to help seniors to live their elder years positively and productively.

So I look back at the decision I made seven years ago (with considerable help from the Men's community!) and say Yes! For me, early retirement from my first career was absolutely the best decision I could have made. The years since my retirement have been the best years of my life, so far. I don't know what's in the future, but as long as I am healthy I expect to remain busy following my passions, whatever they are at that time.