

PROSPECTS

Retirement or Relearning the Joys of the Discovery Process

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It's been 3 months since that fateful day at the end of December when with some trepidation, I retired from academia. I had worked continuously in a university setting for almost 40 years during which time I had, for the most part, enjoyed the lifestyle immensely. In the latter part of my career, my major responsibility as a senior administrator focused on directing research within a medical school setting. Nevertheless, I still had extramural funding for my own research program and felt a closeness to the faculty who were engaged in making discoveries. Granted, this research effort had gradually diminished since assuming the role of Vice Chancellor for Research, a fact that tended to eat at my core. In addition, I still maintained an active posture in the national scene, serving on research review committees, evaluating various facets of the national cancer program and consulting for other university-based cancer centers. But to be honest, the major stimulus to retire came from my wife who believed that our remaining years should be devoted to improving our quality of time with each other. Over the course of years, she had dutifully participated in the ritual academic nomadic dance, accompanying me from one better position to another in various parts of the United States, and readjusting to the different lifestyles associated with these relocations. My life during these times was little altered going from one laboratory (or university) setting to another, while hers was turned topsy turvy.

In more recent years, my wife had begun to experience some health problems, which re-

minded her, more than me, that we were not immortal; our existence on this planet would only be for a defined period of time. During my previous 40 years in academia, I had competed effectively in the research "rat race" by working long hours in the laboratory/office, followed by keeping pace with the scientific literature, writing research papers, reading, reviewing or formulating grants at home. In the early days of our marriage, when our children were young, the few 'leisure' moments were spent with them. I, like most other successful researchers, seemed to have too little time for the person to whom I was closest. The hours during which I was freshest, wittiest, most congenial were spent in the laboratory/office entertaining, educating, or enlightening others. Later, after our kids had matured to adulthood and had left the nest to carry out their own lives, the released time was further engulfed by science, which proved an insatiable mistress. So, I indeed "owed" my wife some 'quality' time. Furthermore, she wished to return to a more rural setting in New England, closer to our summer home in the Northeast Kingdom of Vermont, a place, really an area, which we both loved immensely. We both had been raised in the metropolitan New York City area and at that time had resisted contamination by other exposures for over 25 years. However, in our subsequent meanderings, we had adopted New England as our home and we longed to finish our lives in that idyllic, bucolic setting.

With the preceding as prologue, the decision to retire from an active university life was not precipitous, but one which had been festering within me for several years. I still felt intellectually alive, but for the reasons outlined above, believed that some redirection of my life was necessary. For a number of years, I had begun to regret the relentless vortex that pulled me from the bench, i.e., doing experiments with my own hands. Increasingly, the time required to

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administer research, to do paper work, to fulfill all the academic responsibilities, had increased, eroding in determined fashion the time required to do one's own research. It takes time to do laboratory work. Catching an hour here and there simply is not adequate. Perhaps I was not particularly effective at managing time or not selfish enough to renege on the other commitments associated with academic life.

So, pleasure was increasingly derived vicariously, through the research efforts of my students, postdoctoral fellows, and research assistant professors. Where once I had had first hand knowledge of experimental technology necessary to address my research problems, I was now increasingly dependent upon my students and colleagues for this information. Even if I could manage the time problem, I would not know where to start, in fact, I hadn't the foggiest idea where things were in the laboratory!

I sorely missed working at the bench! I began to fantasize on the possibility of returning to the laboratory and working on the research problems of others. In that way, I would not have the responsibility for obtaining extramural funding to support this research. My plan finally crystallized intellectually—I would spend 4 days each week with my wife and devote 3 days to laboratory research! It seemed to me that this strategy would allow me to have my cake and eat it too.

In order for this plan to work, I would need a 'mentor'—someone who would be willing to assume the responsibility for my rereading and who would provide me with the opportunity for this laboratory experience. This colleague would also have to judge if a 3-day work week were sufficient to accomplish something meaningful and decide if my presence within his/her laboratory would prove too disruptive. Finally, he/she would have to be honest enough to kick me out of the laboratory—but gently—were none of our goals achievable.

After a review of my previous and present associations, and much thought about the identify of this 'messiah,' the choices narrowed down to a former postdoctoral fellow in my laboratory and who now was a successful investigator and professor at a major medical school; he contributed on a consistent basis to the scientific literature. We had maintained active communication since he had become an independent investigator and were on excellent

terms. I also felt quite confident in believing that he would not agree to this arrangement only because of our friendship.

I subsequently met Alan at a scientific meeting, mentioned my thoughts about retiring, and asked if he had a place in his laboratory for an eager individual who had not been in the laboratory for a number of years, but was very willing to contribute up to 3 days per week as a volunteer postdoctoral fellow. After his laughter subsided, I reinforced my interest in this approach, re-emphasized my desire to work at the bench, and asked again if he could take me on. After finally concluding that I was serious, he agreed. We set a time for more detailed discussions of the nature of the research problem in which I would become involved. In the meantime, Alan would provide me with some details of the research underway in his laboratory and would provide some thoughts on the directions that he wished to pursue.

With this part of my retirement plans somewhat secured, I then brought the scenario to my wife for further discussion. She was pleased at the thought of our spending more time together, but was concerned that the 'postdoctoral' experience in Alan's laboratory could prove frustrating, particularly if my performance did not meet my own expectations. I had always been a hard task master, requiring no more of others than I would ask of myself. After promising to stop if the experience became too frustrating, she gave her blessings to this new venture. This led to the final phase of the planning process—to notify the Chancellor of my intention to retire.

Informing the Chancellor was not something that I looked forward to. He and I had had an excellent relationship since my appointment to the new position of Vice Chancellor—a position he had largely defined. I had worked hard, involved myself in many academic matters outside of my fundamental responsibility of directing research, and soon became a valued advisor to him. My professional contributions extended well beyond the original definition of the position, and I assumed increasing academic responsibilities.

After a fitful night, I met with him early in the morning, and told him of my desire to retire in about 1 year. He was quite surprised at the decision and was very interested in the reasons for retiring and as to my plans during retirement. He believed that I was too active a person

to retire in a traditional sense. He asked if I wished to remain as Vice Chancellor in a less than full time basis. After reassuring him that I was not retiring because of overwork, but because of personal reasons, we discussed my plans for retirement. I also assured him that I could serve as a consultant for a number of months after my official retirement date. I did act as a part-time interim Vice Chancellor for about 3 months while a successor was sought for me.

We moved to a rented home in Central New Hampshire, began plans to build a home, hired a builder and I started my 230 mile roundtrip commute from New Hampshire to the medical center in Massachusetts 3–4 days a week, to fulfill my part of the bargain that I had eagerly made with my former boss. I love driving so the commute did not prove too onerous. In fact, the Chancellor provided me with audio tapes to make the trip seem shorter and for fear that I would fall asleep enroute. It was during this time that I learned much about the religions of the world, the intense discussions of Dante's *Divine Comedy*, the scholarly debates on the Old Testament and other intellectual topics through the world of tapes. In fact, I eagerly looked forward to the next morning's tapes. The safari from New Hampshire continued through the end of the year, and then stopped. I felt that it was time for both the university and myself to get on with our respective plans. With the exception of some occasional consultantship tasks with the Massachusetts Medical Center, my association with this university was now finished. Retirement now began in full fashion!

I was appointed as an adjunct professor in Alan's university and I reported to 'work' at the beginning of the calendar year. We discussed my project; Alan assigned me some desk space and an advisor, who I had been instrumental in recruiting a number of years ago as a first year graduate student. Ron, who was now a senior postdoctoral fellow in the laboratory, proved invaluable, often indispensable, and wonderful—he was patient, cognizant of my soft ego, and guided me slowly but surely back to proficiency in the laboratory.

As I began to do my own experiments, the thrill of discovery was once again reclaimed. I had forgotten the tremendous high that is generated upon the successful completion of an experiment. I had also forgotten the time spent waiting for cultures to grow, DNA to be

sequenced, PCR to be completed—this would haunt me for several weeks. I recalled the displeasure I had registered in the past to postdoctoral fellows and students when only a minimum amount of data was presented at the weekly research meetings, a routine in my laboratory. Insufficient time spent in the laboratory was not the only reason for presenting only a small amount of research data—to my chagrin, I rediscovered that research proceeds slowly!

I had also forgotten the brief periods of depression associated with failed experiments and the time that had to be invested in attempting to understand the reasons for the failure. Fortunately, during my early days of 'retreading,' the successes were much more frequent and my general demeanor was accordingly much uplifted. When some of the experimental failures began to occur, I was much more secure in my own abilities and able to accept them in good order.

Perhaps the greatest problem was associated with the absolute necessity to curtail my enthusiasm for the research, and stay within the time that I had allocated for this portion of my retirement, so as not to infringe upon the other aspects. Try though I might, I did find myself wandering into the laboratory on one of the off-days or during the weekend in order to start some procedure, which would enhance my effectiveness in the 'work week.' At these times, I was often accompanied by my wife, who would spend the time reading or writing letters. At these times, I had a feeling of *deja vu*. I recalled my final days as a graduate student when she, as my fiancé, would accompany me to the laboratory on a Sunday so that I could complete a perceived crucial experiment. It is interesting that this repeat process many years later would be associated with a certain amount of pleasure.

All in all, I must say that at this early juncture, the experiment of retiring with a defined plan has proven a great success. I am spending more time with my wife—I hope this is as beneficial to her as it is to me—and I have rediscovered the pleasures associated with doing research first-hand, i.e., through one's own hands. This serves as a constant reminder as to why I got into this business in the first place! It is indeed unfortunate that the more successful we are as scientists, the more people we hire, thus the more time must be spent in planning the day for others, and the less time we

ourselves can spend at the bench. In addition, the other para-laboratory demands, e.g., writing grants, reviewing grants, committee work, also forcefully pull us away from the laboratory.

As another by-product of this phase of my retirement, I have finally discovered the importance of a proper sabbatical. During the many opportunities that were available, I chose not to take a sabbatical leave—in retrospect, this was not a good decision. The sabbatical leave can serve as a means for retooling oneself at the bench and therefore reacquaint one with the delights (and frustrations) associated with laboratory work. Perhaps my previous feelings about sabbatical leaves focused more on what some others had accomplished (or not!) during these times. I often heard of the museums that were visited, the sights that were seen, the

friends that were made, but less of the research that was performed. In addition, I had had the mistaken impression that the time divorced from the scene would impact negatively upon order in the laboratory (a distorted view of one's own importance!) and eventually reflect poorly on one's fundability from extramural sources, and therefore on one's productivity. Needless to say, these interpretations were exaggerated. A well-planned sabbatical leave can lengthen the research career and delay the 'burn-out' time, a lesson I wish I had learned earlier.

I hope that my current feelings about the value of my retirement activities will persist, my sense of accomplishment will continue, and that we will continue in good enough health to enjoy 'each and every wonderful day' with each other. If so, then it has been worthwhile getting to this twilight stage of one's life.