

# Retirement blues without the blues?

John Hills

"Retirement" is a simple but loaded word to mark such a major *rite de passage* in the human life cycle when, after many years of work serving an employer who returns your labour with income, you find yourself with that odd experience of serving yourself. It is a strange, bitter-sweet reality for most; so much anticipated freedom, so much time for personal use and late life flourishing; and yet so much apprehension and fear of loss. Gone, in one stroke, forty years worth of social identity and social status; gone, colleagues to joke and commiserate with; gone, the circumstances and systems to moan about; gone, the predictable daily activities to fill a mind with habit, the comforting certainty of the familiar and knowledge so finely honed from a near lifetime's accumulation of a small, manageable corner of total human expertise. It takes people differently and they take it in different ways. These are a few personal reflections on how it has taken me and the kind of background connections that always capture my curiosity. Even Pope Benedict XVI seemed to think this was a route better chosen than hanging on in there like his predecessors.

Shakespeare always had good and useful words for almost every human life experience and had crisp and beautiful language for his own developmental model, put into the voice of Jacques in *As You Like It*. 'The Seven Ages of Man' rarely appear in serious scientific accounts of developmental theories but perhaps they should:

*"All the world's a stage,  
And all the men and women merely players,  
They have their exits and entrances,  
And one man in his time plays many parts,  
His acts being seven ages."*

The role position of retirement does not feature, even as a six-and-a-halfth act, being a much later historical construct. The Bard cuts straight to the 'endgame', for his model is linear and there is no respite or reward phase like "Passing Go" in Monopoly which *retirement* holds out to the weary life-gamer.

*Last scene of all,  
That ends this strange eventful history,  
Is second childishness and mere oblivion,  
Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans  
everything.*

"Mere oblivion"? What can this mean? Is it a reference to the tragic condition of the senile dementias, where conscious life seems largely to have fled or to be sporadic and not always visible? Or is it the *oblivion* most of us have a healthy fear about? Why, *mere oblivion*, as if it was a little scratch on the car bumper or a bit of a headache? As if not having to endure anymore bad

movies, bad meals, bad drivers, bad breath; like, not having to worry about weight, about the overdraft, the new manager, the kids' school, the health of partners, friends, lovers, children and grandchildren, colleagues, patients? What on earth is *mere* about any of that?

Even the word '*retirement*' rings with many different associations. *Re-tire*: to tire again ... and again ... and again, as if the working life hasn't already done that enough. But the Bard is right; we are all in ongoing and changing dramas. Being both family and systemically alert and subjectively aware, we see how we gradually reach each of the stages of the Bard's designation of life's drama roles. We are all our family-drama understudies. It is in our senses, in our mind, blood and, I imagine, somewhere in our DNA. How can we not measure our experiences and ourselves actively or unconsciously against the great or minor players of our own uniquely conjoined family dramas? How can we not reappraise firsthand all the stories and interpretations that have gone down in legendary or mythic ways in the family narrative? Of course we can't. This is surely what make life interesting, and reflecting on the scenarios and exchanges such an important activity to being fully human. So, how does one play the *retirement part* from your family drama when it comes to your turn?

## My 'retirement part'

So, approaching my own decision to retire, stumbling up from the depths of memory like a lost vagrant suddenly finding a shelter, I remember my grandfather's retirement, forty-seven years ago, when he was 65. He seemed so ancient then to a callow teenager of 18. Yet, here I am, his grey haired replicant. A Welsh artisan, he was forced into economic migration with his wife and daughter around southern England after the naval dockyard in his native Pembroke Dock closed at the end of the first world war. There would be no need for a large fleet after the 'war that would end wars'. No more war; no more need for a work force to equip the instruments of war. Eventually, he got work from the De Havilland Aircraft Corporation in Portsmouth making the Comet aircraft; got his gold watch for 25-years service upon retirement; and three years later was dead. So much for his time of freedom, respite and his life of leisure – before *mere oblivion*.

In common with many working men of his time, he smoked heavily, which didn't help, drank moderately, never went for a medical check and so never submitted himself to the active measurement-regime of today. Often, when we visited our grandparents from far away, I used to sit silently with him in the rear conservatory of their little terraced house in Portsmouth, just enjoying being in his presence. I had a strange reverence for his gentle, calm manner and sense of his depth.

He chain-smoked Woodbines or Players; had fingers stained yellow and brown with nicotine. He would meditate, quietly

looking out of the conservatory window on to the tiny urban garden, or sit reading books of visionary social change, like Edward Carpenter's *Towards Democracy*. Whatever dreams he may have had for a better world from the one that had caused him such family dislocation and bouts of poverty, he kept tightly to himself. He had long since discounted a better world as his social inheritance. He invested his dreams in the future for my brother and me. His philosophy towards personal unhappiness, depression and the prospect of his own death, when I was distressed at his terminal condition, was to "put it out of your mind". This seemed to work both for him, millions of his acquiescent generation and that of my parents' generation, enduring and seeking to survive the war. For me and my generation, whilst admiring his stoicism, it worked only fitfully. The sixties were about being in love with peace; in love with freedom of mind, body and soul; in love with love and letting it all show and go. Death? Oblivion? 'Carpe diem', 'go with the flow', 'want it all and get it now', for tomorrow ... is, well, *mere oblivion*.

So, here I am, a fraction past the age when my grandfather, Albert Vincent Picton retired. Am I fated to live only another two years to 68? Or will I live to my 80s like my father, also a skilled engineer who made his way up from the shop floor to a supervisory role in the Ministry of Defence, but was retired at 60? My brother and I both came down to his retirement do and surprised him. He was proud and delighted to think his sons cared enough for this moment of sharp, transitional identity-change to want to share the ritual with him. He was pretty cynical about the civil service but cared about loyalty to his colleagues, to working to the best of his capabilities and, though a closet republican, was loyal to the Crown as the epitome of the British state. He was a patriot, though far from being an uncritical one. So, these are the male players in my family and whose retirement scripts I am trying to understudy with limited ideas about how it really will go 'on the night' or, hopefully, on 'many nights'.

### Pensions r' us and u

Odd as it seems, it was the Prussian state under Otto von Bismarck in the late 19th century that was the first to introduce a system of national insurance and social, state benefits. It does not quite fit with the stereotype of the military authoritarianism of the Prussian ethos, but it was an early example of what political spin-doctors were later to reheat as "*compassionate conservatism*". It was slightly more conservative than generously compassionate, though. When fixing the pension age, Bismarck evidently wanted to know the upper norm of life expectancy of Prussian soldiery. On being told it was 65 (if you were really lucky and survived some war like the Franco-Prussian one), 65 became the context marker for retirement age.

Like Freud's '50-minute therapeutic hour', 65 became the 'gold standard' under Lloyd George's chancellorship in 1911 when the Liberal government introduced retirement pension entitlement. The First World War helped reduce this ongoing 'cost'. However, today, when after a lifetime untouched by large scale war, we baby boomers, the product of our parents wish for post war domestic security (but not necessarily the wartime equality), have proved remarkable survivors and thrivers. We were raised on the best dietetic resources the UK could muster at the time (generally a poorer shadow of our US contemporaries);

a new, free and vigilant health service has made a laughing stock of Bismarck. What would dear old Otto have made of the all-singing, all-prancing and dancing 70-year-old (in July this year) Mick Jagger, one wonders? Times are indeed a-changing.

This has raised a new political discourse about affordable pensions, in consequence. My sense of social equality makes me feel for those of both genders born after 1953-5, since the elongated retirement age now makes that goal of financial and work respite seem further away than ever. The feeling of being a devalued workforce in an increasingly financially led, not needs led, public service finds this a further mark of human disregard. It can feel as if civil servants are required to reach down for a reactivated 'Bismarck strategy' to hope the workforce is much reduced by the time they reach some future pensionable age like 80.

### The strange vocation of psychotherapy

Psychotherapy is a peculiar profession in which those of us who get into it do so via some other career-route. Mine was to go from being a probation officer to a senior social worker, finally to train in family therapy. We used neither the term "psychotherapist" nor "systemic" in the early 80s. As I grew in confidence and autonomous judgement as a psychotherapist, I wanted to extend my reach beyond the "secure base" of the NHS. Some of the decision was financial; some just wanting to develop in different directions as those AFT members bringing such energy to the Aspens group are seeking to do. I never forsook my loyalty to "home" in the NHS nor belief in its ethos of free and open access to therapy for all, a bold and socially generous principle. The two-thirds time working-contract for the NHS gave me options to explore the demands and presentations of psychotherapy in two very separate cultures and contexts, one public, the other private. However, coming up to the *retirement 'part'*, I am aware it has given me different choices about how to shape and 'play' the future.

I once quoted a joke in *The Psychotherapist* about a cocktail-party encounter between a judge and a psychotherapist. Neither knew the nature of the other's occupation. "Ah", said the judge, "*the older and wiser I get, the better I am at making judgements*". "Strange that", replied the psychotherapist, "*it works the same for me, for the older and wiser I get, the better I am at making non-judgements*". This slightly weak joke does express a strange, almost intoxicating paradox – a long professional life of listening to stories of the tragic and the shadow side of human existence more often leads to greater compassion and understanding of errors of life-judgement, choice and action than to 'burnout'; to be listening with kindness, openness and encouragement helps uncover parts of the personality in self and other capable of a restitution and forgiveness, way beyond what conventional thought deems to be possible or desirable. This is how effective psychotherapy 'redeems' or, in more usual language, promotes change.

Perhaps only with the professional philosopher, artist or 'holy' person, our vocational way of working shares the understanding that to think about oneself is not an exercise of self-indulgence but an absolute requirement. "*The unexamined life is not worth living*", Socrates famously said; but few professional philosophers would take this to the same point of 'noble' suicide as him, nor to the depths of conflicted minds-in-

relationships that psychotherapists enter in the act of making themselves available to others.

To seek, to listen to and stay with the complex jumbled narrative and mood state of a mind in psychosis, is a rare vocational calling; to seek to help make sense of that consciousness and the social group around the sufferer takes a lot of practice. So, to bid goodbye to all expertise in how to circumnavigate this world at a fixed point of time seems a difficult and unnecessary personal act of renunciation, though many do. But some of the human systems in which we operate are, at times, so dysfunctional as to make the decision to carry on a 'no brainer', as I want next to discuss.

### Personal and professional thoughts

Personal questions beset me, and still do about the 'retiring' process, the letting go and 'handing on'. This is not just confined to working life but all human activities. When, for example, should I quit the AFT board? The social activities I undertake? So, what about my own retirement? When would I know it was time to hand over and leave? How much energy would I have for the freedom and opportunity to live for myself not for my work? Would there be any remaining vestige of my 'self' I might recognise as 'me' beyond my professional role, and colleague 'self'? Have I frozen it to extinction or subsumed it in my professional 'self'? Do I only exist as a construction of others ideas about my professional competence, non-risk taking, and non-contentious and organisationally compliant identity? How well would I cope with the direct experience of infinite time, living unchained from the clock's diktat? My bluff would be called and the dream in youth of finally being free of the necessity to work to live and not just create, to have the State and NHS pension as my patron and finally be able to do what I truly wanted to do. Would I be, could I be, up to the challenge? My grandfather dreamt of a better world, which others might create; mine were the ones I might create. So I decided to opt for the safer, middle way, define myself as 'semi-retired' and carry on with some of the familiar, though at not quite the same pace, and defer the final decision

I had always viewed the retirement option as my 'parachute to safety' if my NHS working conditions became intolerable. Like many working for 25 years in the NHS, I was into my fourth re-organisation. Each new trust-creation seemed to be larger than the last, with more levels of management and more and more disconnect from the highest management echelon. I had worked both in the probation service and social services. In each case, there was a strong active ethos of client care, smallish, locality-based organisation. All directly knew and often had reasonably open, direct access to the director or chief probation officer.

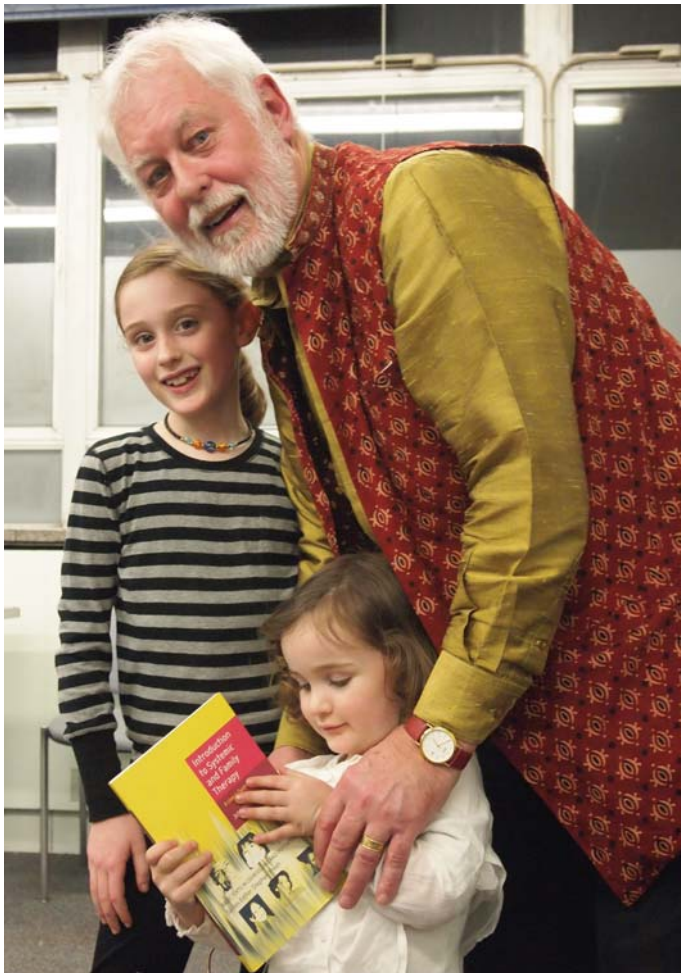
The CEO in my first NHS trust, an ex-naval commodore, was highly approachable, supportive and agreed to my having time off to teach once a week at the Tavistock Clinic. Kent Social Services had paid for my two-year family training at the Tavistock Clinic in London and my travelling expenses. These were halcyon days of generosity towards staff and valuing what, in the dead, mechanical, modern parlance is known as "up-skilling". This generosity was not abused. To this day, I remain profoundly indebted to the help and support I received which completely transformed my professional life and practice. What has happened to this spirit and encouraged-access to learning?

Like the loss of personal connection and belonging to the organisation, many of us have born witness to a petrifying culture of control, conformism, risk aversion, and a management anxiously watching over their shoulder to ensure their decisions are approved by the next level of hierarchy. This is, now, how I have seen the system of the NHS change. Cost and target-driven, computer-dominated, anxiety-activated systems of human management and staff, often struggling with a depleted sense of their own well being, dealing with high levels of social disturbance. The picture is now well known and documented from the Mid-Staffs Hospital enquiry. I was getting ready for a possible exit, but for two things: a sense of solidarity with colleagues up against it, and immediate managers who created a breakwater in the system for a number of us to be experimental; quite against the flow of the tide.

Within our own small-team psychotherapy practice, we had extraordinary freedom to innovate with practice and did so, introducing reflecting teamwork, family and systemic therapy with adult mental illness, older adult mental illness and alcohol misuse. From 2002 to 2009, I had never felt such a consistent, high level of work satisfaction and creativity from working in the NHS and really test-driving systemic work to its full capability. The exhilaration was profound for all of us. I felt all the time and cost invested in my training was being returned to the NHS; not only that, the ideas worked out in practice with some very taxing situations. Our family therapy team at the Mount Zeehan Alcohol Dependency Service in Canterbury won the 2008 'mental health team of the year award' from the *Nursing Journal*. Such recognition at least said that someone had noticed an attempt to pursue good practice of therapeutic care in a less-than-usual way.

Like the forces of nature, the pattern of growth and creativity is inevitably followed by decay and dissolution. Cybernetics teaches that balance has to be found to ensure a reasonably constant environment. You do not pilot an aeroplane through the heart of a tornado and expect its stabilising systems and path of flight to be unaffected. Finally, the new 'business ethos' rushed over our work like a tidal wave. The gods of microchip connectivity and faux science of outcome studies had to be appeased; 'care' was now always to be joined at the hip to 'packages'. The commodification of that most human and compassionate activity, social-healthcare, was fully underway.

The Mount Zeehan unit lost its local trust tender within a year of the 2008 award; was closed and systematically dismantled brick by brick for the value of its main material commodity – its bricks. I wrote to the *Guardian* health page editor about the dismal effect of this process on staff morale but my trust got wind of my intentions and I was threatened with disciplinary action. I did have more success with the BBC local news, through an informal connection. I was summoned to a meeting with my senior line-manager and we had a heated and angry exchange. I was reminded of my contract not to approach the press independently, though no such requirement was in the one I had signed years ago. I was unrepentant and decided it was time to reassert my freedom and autonomy (I can still feel embers of indignation as I write this). I reached for my pension parachute and jumped. Interestingly, my senior manager did the same, several weeks later. Anger is never a good motivator or reason to leave something loved. It is, however, a great emotional and



John Hills and his most devoted readership, grandchildren, Noa and Adele.



John's German great-grandfather, Otto

cognitive simplifier, sometimes useful in short-circuiting the potentiality of the everlasting feedback loop of analysis and consequent paralysis.

At first, I rejoiced in my freedom, though working privately as well, it was not a complete work break. Perhaps we do have guardian angels somewhere for I was surprised and delighted to be invited back for a one-session-a-week stint with older-adult services in the NHS, by a manager I valued. I had, down the years, developed serious workaholic tendencies and a compulsive need to reach way beyond myself. Three years previously, I had contracted to write an introductory text on family and systemic therapy, which I promised in 18 months. As I retired, it was still hopelessly unfinished and felt like an Everest to climb, though I convinced myself that now I had all the time in the world to attend to it. It was all a kind of madness. But then, the wisdom of the body gave me forceful feedback that told me so. Within four months of retirement I had a chronic attack of sciatica that lasted a month. I could scarcely move let alone stand. Then a previously diagnosed cancer of the prostate looked more active and was less quiescent than thought and required the more radical treatment options I had feared. Was this the price of retirement's freedom? Suddenly I felt the history of my grandfather pressing down heavily on my shoulder.

### Postscript

So, what does this all add up to? Well, my health is restored and seems good at the moment; the book is finished; I don't really have to work at all if I should choose not to; my work is

radically reduced, selectively chosen, and the balance with other aspects of myself seems to have found a very agreeable homeostasis. I feel truly content and more at ease with myself; the therapy work I do undertake seems to feel better than ever, and patient and team feedback seems to support this. Curiously, I feel more youthful and find myself re-running those internal DVDs of our lives with surprising equanimity (even the 'horror sequences', I seem to have made my peace with). I fret about the state of the world for my children and grandchildren; the injustice and regressive, short-sighted authoritarianism of much government policy over the last 30 years. I unleash a few squibs from time to time on the AFT list, to prevent my 'angry old man' tendencies from being too inwardly corrosive and boring my family to death. I meditate a lot, even do yoga and a bit of Pilates, to attempt to placate my body's admonishing. I'm seriously thinking of standing for Parliament at the next election in a few years, as a member of some party with a name like "Party for Liberty, Open Democracy and Society" (PLODS). It's probably worth a month's state pension to have a platform to challenge our local MP about his government's policy on the NHS. Will I have enough time to do all I plan? Don't know; but it will be great fun trying.

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