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AS WE LIVE AND WORK

Let's Work to Escape the Degenerative Process of Ageism

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It is better to wear out than to rust out." -- Bishop Richard Cumberland, 1631-1718

What do Warren Buffet, Morris Greenberg, Kirk Kerkorian, Sandy Weill and Jack McKeon have in common? They're all business or sports leaders over age 70 and still going strong. And not one of them has given any indication that he's ready to hang up their spikes and retire.

Which raises an interesting question: Why does this group of leaders and a number of other people over 65 continue to work when clearly they have sufficient funds to pack it up and enjoy the fruits of their labors?

We suspect there are lots of reasons. First, people are living longer as a result of better health care, nutrition, technology and attitude. Life expectancy has lengthened by 50 percent -- from 50 to 77 years -- since 1900. In short, that means if people stop working, they will need to have the necessary funds to sustain them for the long stretch ahead, and they'll have to fill the vacuum with meaningful things to keep them stimulated.

Second, many who delay retirement don't feel they've lost the spin on their curveball. They are good at what they do. They like being part of the action and are well rewarded for their contributions. Work, among other things, provides structure in a person's life and connects people of different ages and cultures. For many people, work is the equivalent of high-test fuel for their psyche.

A number of people are not riveted to the past and don't buy into the thoughtless expectations of retirement that society forces upon them. They have transcended the old paradigm that age and productivity are only measured in chronological terms. Their attitude is upbeat with regard to the changes associated with aging, and with tongue in cheek, they echo the words of Kathleen Norris, the writer who sees life as easy "if you accept the impossible, do without the indispensable, and bear the intolerable."

As a result, they refuse to succumb to the degenerative disease known as "ageism," a progressive disorder in which a person buys into the stereotype of what he or she is "supposed" to be like and is "supposed" to do at different ages.

Most people over the age of 65 are not obsolete because of their age, but because of their attitude. That's an important point considering there are more than 30 million people in the United States over age 65, a number greater than the entire population of Canada, our largest trading partner.

We don't like the term retirement. For many it signifies a permanent loss of work, contribution and productivity. And for many it's a precursor to the ultimate loss -- the loss of life itself. The truth is, we retire many times. We retire from the ranks of the single when we marry. And from the ranks of the married when we divorce. We retire from the ranks of the follower and move to the ranks of the leaders when we take on more accountability and responsibility. And we retire when we forsake singles for doubles in tennis.

What we're doing is trading something old for something new. Retirement can be the closing of a chapter or the opening of a new book.

There are many who leave work and add new chapters to their lives. They find fulfillment in community activities or give vent to creative activities that were shelved during their active work lives. They are more comfortable taking risks and expressing themselves in more personal ways, which did not seem feasible in a business environment.

Either way, retirement is another transition, part of a lifelong process of endings and beginnings. An 85-year-old former university president sums it up well: "Retirement can be lonely, drab and frustrating, but so can a job. Many a life is all of those things and retirement does not make much difference. ... There was always a life not only in your work but also outside it -- often far outside. It is in the mind that great events occur. If you dull the mind, the world will be drab. If your mind grows, as it should, retirement is exciting."

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