



Cooperative Extension



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Ideas for Intergenerational Living

*a series of articles devoted to promoting cooperation
and exchange between the generations*

Article 5 (4/01):

RETHINKING "RETIREMENT": WHAT'S IN A WORD?

One of the most powerful words in the English language is "retirement." To satisfy my curiosity about the emotional responses evoked by this term, I have been on a mission to find out more about the words "retire" and "retirement."

I started my search at home -- with Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary. Webster's defines "retire" as: to withdraw from action or danger: retreat; to withdraw especially for privacy; to fall back: recede; and to withdraw from one's position or occupation.

I couldn't help but wonder why a word that conveys withdrawal is used to describe leaving work after years of service.

While reading history, I learned that before the industrialization of 19th century Europe, the concepts retirement, pensions, sick days and vacations didn't even exist; most people worked until the day they died. Somewhere along the line, retirement became synonymous with old age, and with this association came overtones -- both positive and negative.

Penn State professor of speech communications Jon Nussbaum and others who study perceptions of aging note that much flexibility exists in the path to retirement. Some people, typically those with financial resources, choose "early retirement," and this marker in their life course typically has positive meaning. However, for many -- particularly those who are "forced" to retire -- the event can be a stressful time of role loss and uselessness.

One elderly colleague is certain the word "retire" is based on a reference to the "re-tiring" (changing the tires) of a car or bicycle. Just as we must replace an aged and worn tire, she says, we believe we must replace aged workers.

When I floated the "re-tiring" interpretation to a group of Penn State Cooperative Extension agents, someone jumped up and said, "No, you have it wrong. 'Retire' is positive; it refers to the act of going to bed!" After a few nods and moments of silence, it hit me and a few others that this interpretation was even more disconcerting. Doesn't bedtime mark the END of the day?

(over)

Although our discussion was lighthearted, we realized the serious implications that exist in any discussion about retirement. And we were not the only ones. Recently, American Association of Retired Persons (AARP) leaders, concerned about negative connotations of the term -- particularly among Baby Boomers -- entered court to change the organization's name. They are still known as AARP, but the letters no longer stand for anything.

Some people have tried to change the word itself. Jim Gambone, a Minnesota-based intergenerational specialist, suggests replacing retirement with "refirement." In his book, "ReFirement: A Boomer's Guide to Life After 50," he provides an optimistic vision for how to live meaningfully during the "third age."

Considering the aging trend of the world's population, such efforts are timely. Between 1950 and 2000, the decline in fertility and mortality rates added 20 years to the average lifespan. Although some pundits predict that increases in the number of older adults will lead to social instability and financial disaster, Gambone and others maintain that the increase in longevity is one of the 20th Century's great achievements. Marc Freedman notes in his book, "Prime Time: How Baby Boomers Will Revolutionize Retirement and Transform America," that positive visions abound, such as "productive aging," "lifelong learning" and "civic involvement." These concepts challenge characterizations of older adults as dependent, passive and selfish.

I ask again: What is retirement? In a sense, this question requires a personal answer. Each of us must define our own retirement. At 41, I have much living to do before I can even attempt to formulate a response. However, I find solace and direction in some of the ideas I've encountered. Case in point: T. R. Higgins in the book "Ages Ahead" on the views of the Maori of New Zealand:

"As one ages, cultural responsibilities increase and the experience and wisdom of the older people are acknowledged and treasured. They are often in so much demand there is no thought of retirement."

Many intriguing, inspiring notions about aging also exist closer to home. We all probably know at least one person who is aging successfully -- pursuing their dreams, as well as contributing to others' lives. We also can take note of high-profile role models, like former president Jimmy Carter and former astronaut and U. S. Senator, John Glenn.

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