

stairway to



# Seven

By Fred Gratto

## Things to think about as you consider retiring

**no** matter how great your campus is, no matter how wonderful your job is, no matter how much you like going to work, the day will come when you leave your office with its groaning shelves for the last time. Such a day came for my father, and during the 20 years he was retired, he had plenty to say about it. I've seen that there are good times and lots of worthwhile priorities beyond work. Nonetheless, retirement is uncharted territory until you get there, so illuminating ideas from somebody who has already experienced it might be helpful. Sometimes, I think about the seven steps to a happy retirement which my dad explained to me.

### **1. Keep Your Fork**

My dad said the first step toward a great retirement is to expect great things. This makes me think of my wife's mother. She is a really wonderful cook and we spend a lot of time at her house eating, so I'm surprised that I can still see my feet. Granny gets plenty of compliments from us regulars and the many guests who visit her kitchen. She sidesteps all the praise and acts as if the incredible meal was nothing special. Hinting that the best is yet to come, with a twinkle in her eye, she says: "Keep your fork." Her desserts are a local legend so even after a great meal, we know the best is indeed yet to come.

This is how retirement is, according to my dad, no matter how much fun you're already having, no matter all the worthwhile stuff you're doing at work, no matter how much you're worrying about whether or not your knees are going to be okay. The fun isn't over for you and me even though we've had quite a few birthdays. Sounds wonderful. Imagine having enough time to do the all the things you have always wanted to do. You probably have a long list. It's gonna be great. My dad said some of his best years were after he stopped working. So, sit back and enjoy the future. Expecting the best is the first step to a great time in retirement. Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da, life goes on.



## 2. JUST SAY WHOA

You know you're supposed to exercise. Every doctor would tell you that, so you know the importance of having good health. But what you might not know is how easy it is to be in good shape. I think walking is the answer. I used to be a runner, now I'm a walker. It's fun, easy on the joints, good exercise, and doesn't require any special skills. You can do it and it's never too late to get started. My dad starting walking when he was 60. He's 75 now and none of us know where he is.

Anyway, you'll want to be physically able to do all the fun things you have in mind for retirement. But, you'll need to be ready. You might want to plan ahead. When I lived in Iowa many years ago, I decided to go on the RAGBRAI, the great bike ride across Iowa. Several months before the ride, I invited my blind cousin to go with me. Since his belly was challenging his shirt buttons, he needed to spend lots of time on the stationary bike in the gym to get ready. When the day came to throw our legs over the seats of the tandem bike, he was prepared.

If you have put on a few pounds like me, just say whoa to gaining weight so you'll be ready for retirement fun. Oh, one more thing. Be sure to laugh. Laugh a lot because my dad said if you suppress a laugh it just goes back down and spreads to your hips.

## 3. WORK ON YOUR STACKS APPEAL

How much do you like to read? I love to read and my favorite topic is American history. If I thought about it a couple minutes, I could probably remember what George Pickett had for lunch before he led his famous charge at the Battle of Gettysburg, July 3, 1863. For my recent birthday I got nine gifts, all books. They're in a stack on the coffee table near the alpha male chair in our family room. I like other topics besides history. Some days while I'm at work, my mind drifts away and I can't wait to get home to read one of my new books: *The Legend of Johnny Cash*, *The Gardening Encyclopedia*, *How to Build Adirondack Furniture*, *Best Book of Classic Cars*, *Britain's Greatest Naval Battles*, *The Secrets of Fly-Fishing*, *The Complete Sherlock Holmes*, *Best Recipes of the Southwest*, or *Interior Decorating Ideas from Savannah*.

Reading is fun and stretches my mind. In a letter to John Adams, Thomas Jefferson said: "I cannot live without books." So did my dad. Well, actually, he never did say this to John Adams but he said it to me. Ever notice that when there is a profile on a local leader in the newspaper, they often mention the latest book he or she read? There's a reason for this. Books shape us. My dad said reading is the third step toward a happy retirement. A stack of books always had great appeal to him.

## 4. THIS LITTLE PIGGY WENT TO MARKET

And so can you...maybe to Pike Place Market in Seattle, for example. It's an incredible place and you can read about the leadership there in the book *FISH*, by Lundin et al. Traveling was my dad's favorite thing to do when he retired. He lived in the same little town his whole life, spent 30 years behind bars as a prison guard, almost never went anywhere, and never heard of cheesecake until he got one on his 60<sup>th</sup> birthday. When he got out of prison, he took a job for two years as truck driver going coast to coast so he and mom could see the world beyond their dirt road. I loved it when he called to tell me about a mountain pass in Colorado, the view of the Oregon coast, the endless horizon in Kansas, or some other spectacular place.

Of course, you don't have to spend a lot of money or travel great distances to see new things and have fun when you retire, and neither will I. One of the first things my wife and I are going to do when I stop working is see more of wonderful Florida. My father kept telling me, "There is so much beauty in America so you should go see it!" He liked go see other places, do different things, meet new people, and he



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encouraged me to do likewise. So I'm encouraging *you*. Wherever your beautiful campus is in San Diego, California or Muncie, Indiana or Madison, Wisconsin or Athens, Georgia, or College Station, Texas, there is something really special to see and do just down the road or way down the road.

#### 5. HEY, I COULD DO THAT

One of my neighbors was a police officer in New York City for 30 years. He retired at age 50, moved to Florida, went to medical school for eight years, and became a doctor when he was 58 years old. Now he's 78 and just retired again. The fifth step toward a great retirement, according to my dad, is learning new things...never stop learning. When my dad retired he had lots of interests, so he took a dance class at the community college, started playing golf, and bought a few alpacas, some cows, and a bunch of chickens so he could try farming.

I guess he took seriously a comment from Jeffery Immelt, CEO of General Electric, which he had framed on his office wall: "Good leaders are very curious; they spend a lot of time trying to learn new things." I'm thinking of learning to speak Spanish. That would be helpful in Florida. I might even learn to play the guitar so I can be as cool as Eric Clapton. What do you want to do? What do you want to learn about? Just do it. You're never too old.

#### 6. SOME ASSEMBLY REQUIRED

For 41 years, the Empire State Building was the tallest building in the world, at 1,250 feet. There are taller buildings now: the 1,483-foot Petronas Twin Towers in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia, the 1,670-foot Taipei 101 building, and the 2,657-foot Burj in Dubai. People are building and doing bigger and better things all the time, just like you do on your campus every day and just like you can do later when you retire. My dad had big ideas and tried to get involved in projects that would outlast him. Volunteering was the answer for him and there was never a shortage of worthy causes, like helping at the local library and working with Habitat for Humanity. He also became a volunteer fireman in his little town. Getting involved helped him rise and shine, share his experience, and avoid too much idle time which saps energy, dulls attitudes, and causes a drain on the brain.

You might want to start looking for something you are interested in, some cause or activity that needs your passion, talent, and energy. This will help others, obviously,

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and you'll benefit as well. Love makes the world go round, and so does volunteering. Consider the advice Cornell University President David Skorton gave the 2009 graduating class: "We need you to volunteer in your communities, to serve on school boards, to participate in the political process. We need you to contribute to nonprofit organizations. Most of all, we need you to put those hard-won skills and habits of mind to use not only in your professional lives, but in service to your community and to the world." Same thing applies to you and me.

#### 7. THINK OUTSIDE YOUR BOX

Several years ago my wife and I visited New York City with our kids. While riding in a subway, our youngest son, Dominic, was



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making silly faces at himself in the dark glass. Our oldest son, Anthony, told him to quit being so goofy and look at the train tracks to see where we were going. Dominic studied the glass one more time and said he didn't see any tracks, just his face. Having run out of patience, Anthony blurted out: "C'mon, look beyond yourself!"

That's really good advice and it sounds just like some of the pep talks my dad gave me. He was a big believer in underdogs, always looking for someone to help. In fact, just before he died last year, we were talking about when I might retire. He reminded me that I would have plenty of time and that helping people is the most important thing I should be doing. I need to keep looking beyond myself, mentoring, just as I have been helped all along the way, all these years.

Mentoring is good stuff, and the mindset of serving others goes all way back to Homer's *Odyssey*. Odysseus, preparing to begin his epic voyage, entrusted his son, Telemachus, to his friend Mentor, who would guide him in the passage from boyhood to manhood. A mentor, usually someone older and more experienced, maybe like you and me, helps one or more people figure things out, avoid mistakes, and get where they want to go. There are many examples of mentoring relationships.

In American history, Thomas Jefferson mentored future presidents James Monroe and James Madison. In baseball, Joe

DiMaggio mentored Mickey Mantle. In the field of philosophy, Socrates mentored Plato. In the *Star Wars* movies, Ben Kenobi mentored Luke Skywalker. In college football, Lou Holtz mentored Urban Meyer.

An old song by Pink Floyd says: "I have become comfortably numb." Don't do that. Find someone to help and encourage. Maybe you could work with kids at the YMCA or visit a nursing home a couple afternoons per week. Make a big difference in someone's life. Think about it. You could be like Joe DiMaggio to someone. That would be really cool.

#### FIELD OF DREAMS

One of the classic lines from this 1989 movie about baseball in Iowa is: "If you build it, they will come." Most of us have heard that one, and here's another one I remember: "What's in it for me?" This is the question Ray Kinsella (Kevin Costner) asked after he had done everything the voice on the field requested. Well, regarding retirement, you might be wondering, "What's in it for me?" According to the first part of my dad's list, there's a lot in it for you: good health, fun things to see and do, new things to learn about. But, perhaps you noticed that in the last part of his list, the focus changed from "What's in it for me?" to "What can I do for others?" The first part of the list reminds me of Toby Keith's 1993 song, "I Wanna Talk About Me." Consider these lyrics:

I wanna talk about me  
 Wanna talk about I  
 Wanna talk about number one  
 Oh my me my  
 What I think, what I like, what I know,  
 what I want, what I see  
 I wanna talk about meeeee

From my dad's perspective, the focus in retirement should gradually change from ME, to others. He told my brother and me this a bunch of times, so it still sticks in my head: "You boys think and live like the movie of life is all about you, but it's not. Real success comes from doing things for others."

That's a lot to think about! My dad explained to me the seven steps to a happy retirement. They're pretty good and I'll try to follow them. Come to think of it, some of the steps might do me some good *before* I retire. ☺

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