



Adjusting to a New Role

Retirement: This new “land of the forever liberated.” You’re on your own now. It’s free sailing ahead. But wait, are you sure of your destination?

It’s a radical change—the kind of shock that has little cushioning. Men and women of varied backgrounds are often deeply troubled by retirement adjustments and are vulnerable to distressing episodes while making the social and psychological adjustments in retirement’s crossover process.

All-Too-Typical Scenarios

When you retire and the long-anticipated day of closure arrives, the envisioned venture ahead is briefly obscured by the nostalgia that inevitably occurs when separating from a long career. Although essentially euphoric, suddenly you are fighting moist eyes and a lump in the throat. Desk drawers have to be emptied, files must be cleaned out, and a mountain of memorabilia is carefully boxed up or casually thrown out. Another vision has taken over. In this transition you are understandably a bit numb. You haven’t been this way before. And if you’re married, there are adjustments rising on the home front as well.

For one last time, the door is locked. With contrived casualness, you repeat good-byes for the second or third time. With less notice than expected, you just walk away from it all. Your associates may steal side-glances, but no one steps

up to stop the action; there's nothing to stop, nothing more to say. This is it! This is retirement!

Taking the first untested steps, you have joined the ranks of "retiree." Perhaps a celebration party will break the awkwardness the first evening, but more likely you'll have a quiet dinner with your spouse and a few friends. It hardly seems real. However ceremoniously, let's face it, a lifetime of good years is over, ended abruptly with little more than a smile and a wave.

For so long you said, "Can't wait for the new life to begin!" Why then a sudden surge of turbulent, ambivalent feelings? In ways you couldn't have imagined just weeks before, your self-affirming status has begun to erode. Personal self-definition isn't that clear any more, and like an adolescent you might ask, "Who *am* I?" Watch out, because you could be hit by one enormous change in status and a diminishing self-valuation. Your life is becoming something like a vacuum, and it doesn't run by your watch like it used to!

New-Life Characteristics

So is it "freedom at last," where there are no more time demands and it's a free lifestyle of leisure galore? One thing seems sure: the work routine has disappeared. It's the chance to live those long-held dreams, the opportunity to do "all the things I've wanted to do but never had time for."

Exactly what is so promising about retirement? There's no contract that spells out the details, no blueprint that seems to fit everyone. So how do we know what to expect? What if gains do not outweigh losses? What about psychological costs down the road? What about major social adjustments? Can we handle it all without some mental turmoil? What are your own hopes and dreams? And more important-

ly, around what center will your life be organized? Is there productive life after a career ends? If so, of what kind? How should you restructure your new world? And what about *Christian* retirees in particular? Are adjustments different from the general population? Do Christians have prospects and ongoing life-purposes unlike those of non-Christians?

Successive Life-Stages

In the mid-70s, Gail Sheehy popularized the term “passages” in a book based on a 10-year study by a team led by Daniel Levinson. Levinson’s own book was titled *The Seasons of a Man’s Life*. Twenty years later, Sheehy’s newer book on this subject is titled *New Passages*.

Today we speak of the “seasons” of life and of “passages” between them. In some instances both spouses retire at the same time, and that calls for a whole new set of compromises and adjustments. Tasks of major proportions immediately lie ahead for both partners. One challenge is the call for wise and mature marital negotiation.

A helpful study is William Bridges’s book *Transitions: Making Sense of Life’s Changes*. In introducing the theme he gives substance to the lines of T. S. Eliot in “Little Gidding”: “What we call the beginning is often the end, and to make an end is to make a beginning. The end is where we start from.”¹ Bridges elaborates on the idea that you not begin any new phase of life without first closing off and leaving behind many primary attachments and commitments. The transition follows a four-step progression:

(1) *Closure with the Past*

As you leave the network of associates you’ve known intimately in the working world, this network must be replaced with a new, equally significant group of people. Otherwise, you may suffer a painful and debilitating reaction to

the loss. Before the void can be filled with new people, however, there must be a sense of closure with former relationships, opening the way to accepting and building new ones. Bridges's word is *detachment*—separation from yesterday's social network, the all-important first step I choose to call *closure*.

(2) *Repositioning*

People in social systems are organized in hierarchies, each having position and rank (the so-called pecking order). Your place in the hierarchy tells everyone who you are in the organization and where you belong in the social ranking. Primary attachments are comprised of the group of people with whom you work and includes every person and activity that makes up the organizational structure. When you retire, you undergo change in position, status, and rank. New skills have to be acquired to ensure that the replacement group of people meets with equal acceptability. "Repositioning" takes place only when there has been (a) closure with past status and position, and (b) separation from the former network of associates.

(3) *Reorientation*

As we orient ourselves around our careers, this process becomes the means by which we measure the progress of our lives. When we retire we must reorient ourselves, first away from those careers to which we've been so intimately oriented for so long. No longer is career a useful measure to define our lives. In turn, we reorient around a new status, new self-definition, new roles—all to fit the new situation. The occasion for this is retirement, which in the lifetime of most persons is the last rite of passage.

(4) *Confirming New Realities*

We can no longer *confirm* the past as a present reality but need now to *confirm new realities*, exchanging the old for the new. Here we begin to deal with our situation delib-

erately and realistically. We *disconfirm*, or take a position that's against our tendency not to accept. In fact, we disconfirm our tendency to idealize either the past or the future. This deliberate intention paves the way for realistically moving into present time without being bound by psychological past-tense shackles.

When we progress through any major life-transition, *endings always come before beginnings*. For some individuals, these transitions are apparently unexceptional—no special concerns are associated with disconfirming the past and confirming the present—no big deal, as we say. For others the transition is painfully exceptional—totally disruptive, even to the point of bringing on a brief state of deep depression and dysfunction. Of course, the transition does not incorporate identical hurdles for every person. Different degrees of difficulty are to be expected and treated accordingly.

Bridging Between Life-Stages

Transition bridges are the movement between any two distinct stages of life. It involves moving out of one stage marked by stability and certainty, then briefly passing through a period of change, loss, uncertainty, and instability. Becoming reestablished in the new stage is once again marked by relative stability and certainty. It isn't possible to straddle two stages at the same time, but there is a brief occupation of an unfamiliar, untested neutral zone with disturbing uncertainty, confusion, ambiguity, and instability.

Since individuals and circumstances differ widely, the degree of difficulty accompanying the passage cannot be accurately predicted. There is no way to tell which elements will be easiest, which more unsettling. The older a person becomes, the more defined and concrete their indi-