

## Letting Go and Moving On

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**W**hy are we drawn so compulsively toward trying to recapture a life now gone? What is so seductive about past years other than fond reminiscences? It is one thing to catch ourselves looking back at the past, but now the more serious question is why we try to actually go back, if only in our minds. Why is this compulsion so dangerous to successful retirement adjustment? How do we distinguish the *helpful* from the *hurtful* in our attachments to the past?

First, the past is all we know for certain; it's already ours by experience; it is the one vast intangible we *possess*. A vacuum is filled in so far as a newly retired man or woman stands peering into a largely unforeseeable future and hence is a bit frightened. The present is still tentative while the future is altogether unknown. For this reason alone the past is much more comfortable to contemplate. So we find security as well as the evidence of our cherished self-identification in clinging to a past that cannot change.

### **The Role Nostalgia Plays**

Second, we tend to be captives to nostalgia with reference to what we've loved, lost, and left behind—familiar neighborhoods, close friends, significant career, meaningful social circles, fulfilling activities, important statuses, and the multiple roles we've played. In other words, it is about all the people, events, and involvements of a lifetime. This

aura of nostalgic reminiscence is given great force by our emotional attachments to that memoried past.

We need to be aware that nostalgic reminiscence is selective, retaining memories we never want to lose.

But *reminiscence-plus-nostalgia* can, and often does, exacerbate the problems of a smooth retirement transition. Reminiscence is spontaneous recall, useful for illuminating the overall inventory of our personal history. One prominent psychiatrist explains: “By monitoring the process of change that inevitably occurs over time, reminiscence contributes in a fundamental way to the stability and integrity of the personality.”<sup>1</sup>

Reminiscence provides continuity to the historical awareness of our life. Originally the word nostalgia meant “homesickness”—a painful longing for joys attached to people and places now removed. The word comes from the Greek “to return home” and rather curiously carried the implication of a painful condition. In the evolving etymology, the word came to mean that which a person longs for, that which belongs to another time—usually past time. This accurately defines our problem.

Nostalgia can be terribly regressive in that it shuns the present and the future to feed on the past. So nostalgia may be either normal or pathological, depending on whether or not it is compulsive and obsessive. The retiree who lives unrealistically in nostalgia is leaning toward pathological nostalgia. Unfortunately, the person so compelled is generally the last to recognize it, and so is not in position to deal with it.

The problem with nostalgia is the way it distorts and blows things out of proportion, frequently incorporating exaggerated emotions that further complicate the overblown picture.

Many retirees struggle against compulsive nostalgia over that which has been lost or left behind. Not that this is

unnatural, but it can pose an obstacle to making adjustments to the new life of retired living. Recognizing this is the first step in dealing with it.

Peter Kreeft adds a somber note about what causes the aging person to indulge nostalgic reminiscence. It's not the desire to relive the past but rather not wanting to look forward to the time of likely disablement and death. The non-Christian may well wonder whether death will forever end the ability to remember the nostalgic past that is so meaningful, forever banishing those happy memories. In Kreeft's words,

"The experience of longing for the past that is unattainably gone is our deep nostalgia brought about by the knowledge of death. It is seeing our past with the eyes of death before we die."<sup>2</sup>

### **We Are Our Social History**

What we need to remember is that reminiscence is one of the greatest features of human existence. Each of us is a product of past experiences. What we are now is the accumulation of all that we have ever been. To know ourselves as unique individuals different from all others, having our own self-definition, seeing ourselves in a sweeping panorama of individual social history. We cannot detach ourselves from that history. *We are our social history; our social history is us!*

Inescapably, people and events filed away in memory form the content of our personal history, the record of how we've come to be the persons we are. Seen together, the continuity of past and present validates who we are in the here and now. To relive these memories is to keep alive all the elements that contributed toward making us what we've become. And because what we're continuing to be-