

Reflection on Ageing

by Phil Rasmussen

While I was sitting in a doctor's office, a patient came in and the receptionist had him update some records. It seems we are always up dating records in doctors' offices, but that is for later in this story. Anyway this patient was having difficulty signing his name. Like most of us he apologized for taking so long and explained that he had recent surgery and that was why he was having difficulty signing. Turns out he had a pinched nerve and that just the week before, he had an operation on his neck to release the nerve. It was during his explanation that I had a gripping thought, you know one of those moments when the light bulb goes off in your head.

I have often wondered why some people have such a difficult time with retirement and/or getting older. I had always been told two things about retirement. The first is that you will find yourself busier than when you were working. The second was that you needed to find something to do in your retirement, otherwise you will go bonkers. Both of these sayings are probably true but I have looked at retired people before and after I retired and I do not believe that either of these sayings addresses the difficult times that retirement brings to many people.

Retirement in many ways is like the empty nest syndrome but instead of children leaving home it is the retiree leaving work. Either way it is a form of abandonment for the individual. The empty nest syndrome can be defined in general terms as the feeling of grief and loneliness that parents may feel when their children leave home for the first time. Aside from grief and loneliness other symptoms may include depression, a sense of loss or purpose, feelings of rejection, worry, stress and/or anxiety. These are exactly the same symptoms that retirees may have.

The advice for coping with the empty nest that is given to parents is the same advice that retirees receive and often carry out in the first year or two of retirement. The primary advice that is given is to do the things you have always wanted to do but were not able to because of kids (job). Other advice includes pursuing your own interests and hobbies, reconnect with past friends, keep a journal, or do volunteer work. While fine advice for parents, for retirees it generally works for only a short time.

I am convinced that how well you will cope with retirement is based on how well you dealt with change as a child and during the time you worked. Before delving into this discussion, let us consider two things that that will never change. First, there will always be taxes, that is a given which has little to do with our discussion. The second is that there will always be change. This is especially so as you enter your silver, golden, and

end years. For example your health will be constantly changing, prices of goods continually go up while your income remains generally the same, and your family and friends will move on. These are givens that constantly change.

As a child your major changes may have included moving from house to house, place to place, school to school, friends moving away, and graduating from high school. When you were in the workforce, changes may have included transfers to another place, being hired and/or fired, new employers and/or supervisors, changing job requirements, promotions, and reorganizations. Often times when a person does not have much change in his or her life, changes in the workforce often stresses that person out. For example, if you were in the military, changes occurred regularly and you took them in stride. It did not matter much if you were transferred to a new post, given a new job or got a new commander. On the other hand, if you were a long-time employee at a company and did essentially the same job day in-day out, a major management reorganization or entirely new and different equipment to do the job you were doing, you probably became very stressed out. After awhile as things settled down and you became familiar with how the management reorganization or equipment worked, your stress level probably became less as well.

And so, now that we are in retirement and aging, how well we handle this new part of our lives is not about the hobbies we take on, or the volunteer work we do, or even meeting new people or going on vacations. Instead, how we handle this time is based on how well we handle change. Expect it daily, for like taxes, there will always be change every day. While the pillars in your life, be it God, family or friends, can help support you through the more challenging changes, it will be up to you to handle your changes.