

The Retirement Syndrome: The Psychology of Letting Go

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This article analyzes a problem that can be described as *the retirement syndrome*. In exploring the difficulties many leaders face in letting go at the end of a full career, it reviews a number of the barriers to exit: financial, social, and psychological. It looks at the physical and psychological effects of aging, in the context of retirement; examines the experience of nothingness that single-minded careerists often feel after retirement; describes the talion principle, a subliminal fear of reprisals; and discusses the 'edifice complex,' the wish to leave behind a legacy. The article concludes with suggestions as to how individuals and organizations can develop more effective and humane disengagement strategies.

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The years teach much which the days never know — Ralph Waldo Emerson

Do not go gentle into that good night,
Old age should burn and rage at the close of day,
Rage, rage against the dying of the light.

— Dylan Thomas

Growing old isn't so bad when you consider the alternative. — Maurice Chevalier

Introduction

In an Oscar-nominated bleak comedy called *About Schmidt*, Jack Nicholson stars as Warren Schmidt, a

67-year-old Omaha, Nebraska, insurance executive who is set adrift following retirement. The film is the character study of a sad, aging man who is face-to-face with mortality and the emptiness of a life near its end. Schmidt's retirement party is the first of the movie's painfully bittersweet ceremonies. The party, a somber event for Schmidt, portrays quite clearly that he isn't looking forward to his retirement. He doesn't understand why he has to be put out to pasture, and he doesn't like the idea of being replaced — especially by a person he doesn't respect.

Given his career single-mindedness, the future promises no golden sunset for this retiree. Schmidt seems to have cultivated no interests outside work. He is at a total loss as to what he might do. Upon his retirement, he reassesses his life, wondering how all his hopes had come to this. He has grown to loathe his dowdy wife. His treasured but alienated daughter, who lives what feels like a world away in Denver, barely speaks to him and is set to marry a man he regards as a total nincompoop. Searching for some kind of meaning, Schmidt decides to contribute \$22 a month to the welfare of an African 'foster' child. His frank letters to six-year-old Ndugu appear to be the only place where he is able to establish human contact, where he feels a degree of authenticity.

When his wife suddenly keels over while vacuuming their home, the rest of Schmidt's world falls apart. Unable to take care of himself, he begins to deteriorate physically. Not only does he neglect his appearance, it doesn't take very long before his home is messier than a pigsty.

On an impulse, Schmidt — uncertain about his future as well as his past — packs up his 30-foot Winnebago

(which his wife had nagged him into buying) to set out on a cross-country journey to stop his daughter's wedding. Along the way — no longer shielded from life by the work environment or his wife — he tests out the idea of connecting with other people. His efforts turn out disastrously: for example, he makes a depressing visit to his childhood home, which has been turned into a tire store, and he tries to strike up a friendship with a trailer-park couple he meets along the way that ends abruptly when he makes a clumsy pass at the wife.

When Schmidt reaches Denver, he discovers that his daughter's future relatives represent his worst nightmare: a rowdy clan of counterculture refugees and wannabes. His future son-in-law sells 'top of the line' waterbeds and wears his long, thinning hair in a ponytail. His son-in-law's mother is the ultimate lewd old gal, who has him experience a hot tub (even joining him in the nude) and tells him far more than he would ever want to know about her sex life while spouting out psychobabble. Her intrusiveness is anathema to Schmidt, who has wasted away in the insurance industry for decades; whose sterile, middle-class life was micro-managed by his wife; and who, probably because of his own controlling behavior, drove his uptight daughter to a guy like his future son-in-law. During his mini-quest across the Midwest, we see a man gradually stripped of all his illusions about his past career, his marriage, his daughter, and his life. Schmidt seems destined to end his life as he lived it: a failure, going through the motions of living with a tight little smile that hides isolation, depression, and terror. If Schmidt had known that his retirement would turn out like this, he might have managed his life quite differently.

Schmidt ends up a man full of regrets, a sorry example of poor career and life management. As the story unfolds, *About Schmidt* becomes a cautionary tale for the rest of us. It reaffirms the wise counsel not to put all one's eggs — career eggs, in this case — in one basket.

Although it has often been said that when we grow old, we have to give up certain things, this statement should be reframed somewhat: if we *fail* to give up certain things, we grow old. The challenge, of course, is knowing what to give up, and how. If we want to live life to the fullest in our later years, we have to give up, decades earlier, our single-minded devotion to work and the almighty dollar. We have to invest in matters other than work. If we invest in relationships, for example, we will create good memories with people close to us that will sustain us in difficult

times. *About Schmidt* makes us realize how rare are people who grow old with grace. For too many of us, retirement comes as an unexpected shock, a stage for which we are poorly prepared.

As the example of Schmidt illustrates all too depressingly, sooner or later people in positions of power and authority have to let go. The extent to which letting go is a positive or negative experience depends very much on the individual and his or her particular circumstances. Letting go has a devastating effect on some people; they perceive it as a hostile act, whether it happens at a prearranged stage in life (i.e. at retirement), through voluntary or imposed redundancy, through an organizational or political *coup d'état*, or through ill health.

For leaders, the relinquishing of power is especially difficult. The public recognition that has accompanied their position at the top has been a major dimension of their lives. Just as trees need water and sunshine to flourish, many leaders need the admiration of their subordinates to feel truly alive. They crave an endless supply of narcissistic stimuli. For them, retreat into the private sphere represents an enormous reversal. They are suddenly deprived, at retirement, of what to them are essential nutrients: identification with an institution of great power; influence over individuals, policies, finances, and the community; and constant affirmation of their importance as individuals and of their role as leader to others. The prospect of climbing down off the top of the heap and becoming a nobody holds little attraction for them. As former president Ronald Reagan once quipped: 'Two weeks ago I went into retirement. Am I glad that's over! I just didn't like it. Took all the fun out of Saturdays.'

This article explores the difficulties many leaders have in letting go at retirement. It discusses a number of the barriers to a graceful exit — financial, social, and psychological — and reviews the physical and psychological effects of aging. It also discusses a number of psychological processes that affect retirement: the experience of nothingness perceived by many in the absence of work, the talion principle (i.e. the fear of retaliation), and the 'edifice complex' (the wish to leave a legacy). Although these psychological processes are discussed sequentially, they occur in no special order (and often in combination) in the inner world of the executive, making retirement an insidious process. In conclusion, the article offers observations on how individuals and organizations can develop more effective and humane disengagement strategies.

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