

Retirement According To Kurt

Kurt Arehart - 2017

Through most of our lives, retirement is viewed as a hazy and distant prospect. Some see a desirable future state and work hard to create conditions for a comfortable time of freedom and recreation. Some see a time of rapid physical decline, of privation and want, and yet do little to brighten this vision. The problem is too big, they do not know how to begin, and so give in to the lure of consumerism in the now. These sad souls will never be able to stop working voluntarily.

For most of my life I have taken the former view. With Nancy and I both generating good income we had the luxury of meeting our family's needs while rejecting showy consumerism and ostentation, instead saving and investing toward a realistic financial state where retirement is possible.

Notice that I avoided calling this process of saving and investing a retirement plan. This relative frugality merely created the conditions in which retirement was possible. A retirement plan, in my mind, seeks to answer the question: What do I do in this golden time of freedom and creative potential? How do I flourish in this new life I have won through some combination of work, judgement and luck?

As is so often true, my answer is found in the balancing of several desired states. A flourishing life is built upon a deep reservoir of friends and family, robust wellness, and creative growth, capped by purpose and meaning found through employing your best skills in the service of others.

Tending And Expanding The Garden

I have been delighted to discover the power of reconnecting with old friends and family members too long neglected. After letting a friendship or family connection languish with little or no contact for many years, it is natural for an introvert like me to feel resistance to the social risk of reaching out and reconnecting. There is discomfort in admitting that I have under-communicated and maybe let a relationship fall away. And what if we have grown in completely different directions? It can seem easier to sadly shrug and move on.

In my early retirement travels I have pushed back against this discomfort and reached out to reconnect many times. The rewards have been remarkable. After being apart sometimes twenty years or more, I have been thrilled by the experience of being welcomed back into the lives of dear family and friends from long ago. Friends who, like me, have raised up their families, built a life, and are now so pleased to share what they have discovered, what they now value, what they have become. Expanding and tending this garden of possibilities, of joy, of mutual support, will be deeply satisfying for many years to come.

Caring For The Engine

It certainly helps to have drawn a good hand from the gene pool. I am blessed with a body that is fundamentally sound, is resistant to disease, responds well to exercise, maintains a good weight with little effort, and is capable of learning complex physical movement and balance. In the same package I got a brain that can be quick, creative, analytical, capable of learning complex skills with reasonable effort, and, very importantly, wired for empathy.

This is truly a fortunate draw from the deep end of the gene pool. Even better, I had the fabulous luck to have excellent, thoughtful, nurturant parents who created for me a solid foundation of unconditional love and support from which to launch my life with solid emotional balance.

And I almost certainly benefited from another form of luck. I imagine this scene playing out over lunch in April of 1977 between my father, R.F. Arehart, Senior Engineer - Relay Division, Philadelphia Electric Company, and Skip Ward, Senior Sales Manager, General Electric - Relay and Switchgear Division:

Skip: "So, Bob, how are Helen and the kids? Everyone well, I hope?"

Bob: "Helen is struggling some: she is worrying over a number of elders in her family, carrying them to medical appointments, arranging for benefits, putting out fires pretty much every week. It is taking its toll, and I am worried about her. I guess it is all part of life, but she sure is suffering with it."

Skip: "Ouch. That can be rough. My Martha has her mother upstairs with us, so I know what you are saying. How about your kids?"

Bob: "Well, Rob, my oldest, is maybe going to get on with the Philadelphia Fire Department, kind of a dream of his, and Dawn, my youngest, is showing some interest in accounting. We are hoping she goes on to college now that she found this groove."

Skip: "Ah, two nice stories in the making. What about your middle son, Kurt?"

Bob: "Oh! You know, he just told us he had a first interview with GE, and was carrying on about some kind of financial management training program you folks have. He's about to graduate from Penn State in finance. I guess he's done pretty well. Wouldn't that be something? If he wound up working for good old GE?"

Skip: "No kidding! I know about that program! One of the best in industry, and pretty competitive, I hear. If Kurt can get into that, he's on his way! Wow, isn't that something?"

..... And on to the business at hand, Skip's attempt to sell millions of dollars worth of GE relay equipment to Bob's PE Relay Division.

I further imagine that Skip, a successful and senior sales professional, would instantly see that Kurt Arehart getting hired into GE's Financial Management Program could not help but aid his

sales position with Bob. And so, he'd have placed a call or two, found out who was managing the hiring process, and put in a good word for Kurt Arehart. Maybe get his resume sorted toward the top of the pile.

This is called white male privilege as I am certain it existed in 1977. And I feel fairly certain that I would have got at least a helpful nudge into my hiring at GE, where I had a successful and lucrative 38 year career.

Bob Arehart was a man of very high integrity and would never have asked Skip to help me, and certainly never would have conditioned any purchase decisions upon such help. And yet, Skip, as a good sales professional would have instinctively seen the advantage of providing that help.

So, I got the job. With maybe a little help. What an advantage!

The United States of America in 1977 tilted heavily toward white males, and my chances of thriving and building one success upon the last were excellent. This enormous head start amounted to far less day-to-day stress and bore directly on my long term health and wellbeing.

Thus I have fairly established that luck and chance, and almost certainly privilege, are inextricably woven into the fabric of my successes and achievements. I found access to a satisfying, creative professional life burdened with far less health-sapping stress than most Americans. But that does not mean that health and wellness are to be left to chance.

I have learned that we each are responsible for our wellness. We cannot lapse into a passive acceptance of rapid physical decline. We cannot rely upon others, regardless of medical training, to fix our ills through a wave of medications and invasive procedures. I have seen friends and family members lapse into a state of overmedication, where one pill is offered to control the side-effect of another, and a bewildering rabbit warren of side-effects, listlessness and depression results. "Big Pharma" run amok. I have seen others jump on the surgical table in search of a quick fix, with little or no improvement in return. Only new pains and scars.

In my particular case, on receiving a diagnosis of extreme osteoarthritis in a knee, I agreed to an arthroscopic procedure followed by injections of a lubricant, and was fit for a monstrous device known as an "unloader brace". It took me well over a year to see that none of these things, that I allowed to be done to me, were the answer. I instead did my own research, arrived at my own diagnosis, and sought out a skilled physical therapist to guide me in developing a routine of stretching, self massage and core strengthening, sprinkled with a bit of yoga, that I start every day with. The results have been gratifying. My ability to return to cycling, skiing, hiking and the simple joy of flexible motion in my mid-sixties contribute daily to a sense of wellness. Best of all, my daily 30 minute routine is pleasurable in the moment, and thus is addictive, and the long term benefits continue.

Creative Expression

Most folks have at least dabbled creatively at something at some point in their lives. Music? Painting? Photography? Carving? Writing? It may be possible to rekindle an interest in an art form set aside long ago. Or not. Maybe that particular calling is long quiet.

The great author Elizabeth Gilbert, in her book [Big Magic. Creative Living Beyond Fear](#), advises that we not wait for some shining revelation in order to plunge into creative work. Instead she asks us to heed the tiniest whisper that may pull us into some unlikely, previously overlooked interest. It may lead to a dead end. And it may open into a vast space of creative flourishing. You cannot know unless you listen and follow. Her excellent novel, [The Signature Of All Things](#) started with just such a whisper.

Purpose and Meaning

In his book, [Flourish: A Visionary New Understanding of Happiness and Well-being](#), Martin E.P. Seligman, often hailed as the father of positive psychology, sets out the conditions needed to allow a life to truly flourish. In this he builds on the foundation laid by the pioneering work of Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, nicely summarized in his must-read work, [Flow: The Psychology of Optimal Experience](#). I beg you to make time to read these books and more around the topic. But for now, I offer this high-level summary:

In order to truly flourish in life, we need both deep engagement and a life of meaning.

A state of deep engagement, also called being in a state of flow, requires that you be working on something that:

- Causes you to call upon your signature skills, that unique combination of talents and training that make you who you are.
- Is challenging, but within your grasp, such that you can see the path to completion.
- Is measurable, such that you can see the progress you are making.
- Creates the sense that you are uniquely positioned to succeed at this work, making it a signature achievement.

When these conditions are met, you will tend to fall into the flow-state, the state of deep engagement, such that you do not feel hunger, ignore the state of your bladder, and are unaware of passing time. “Where has the morning gone?”, would be the typical refrain.

If this state of engagement is experienced while working on something larger than yourself, then a sense of meaning can result. Depending upon your gifts, your signature skills, a state of flow and meaning could be found while dabbling in local politics, or working on a Habitat house, or at the Food Bank, or with lonely elders.

In my particular case I was lucky to discover that I particularly enjoy volunteering with at-risk teens who are striving to improve their lives. Because I know what a really great volunteer experience feels like, this is what I seek in retirement. I want to drill deeper into working with teens, but in a way that fully levers my signature strengths in order to trade my time and talents for satisfying, lasting impact. Developing such opportunities takes time, more time than I had expected. I will be patient and continue to work for just the right ways to serve. This is a joyful process of discovery, creativity and innovation.

For me, the ultimate expression would be working with selected teens, kids I really connect with, exposing them to the fun of the outdoor life, while mentoring all the while. And, to do this while guarding my ability to unplug and travel liberally, seeking new and inspiring experiences while tending and growing my garden of dear family and friends.

And Yet

As Maslow tells us with his famed hierarchy of needs pyramid model, we first must attend to the basic necessities of life before we are freed to pursue such lofty concepts as engagement and meaning and the resulting flourishing life. 'Self actualization' was his top-of-the-hierarchy term.

This means having enough money to retire, and knowing it and believing it. It is a big leap of faith to voluntarily cut off a stream of income, to end a career, to believe that you have all you need to live fully in a lengthy retirement.

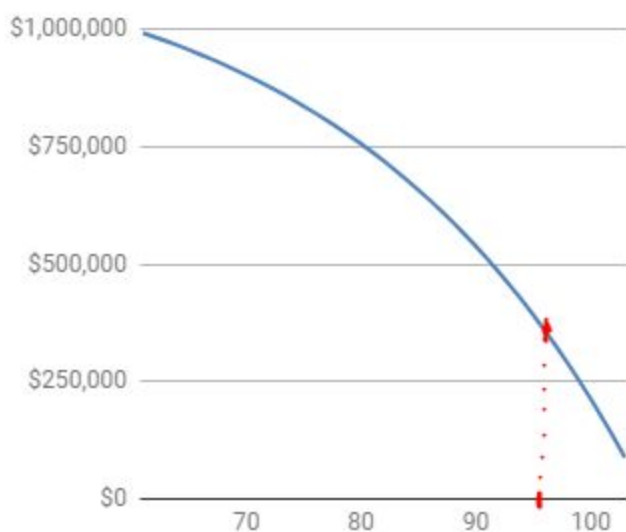
I am grateful to have come upon a man wise in life and things financial, who was generous with his time and ideas. Alan Finkel has for years been a patron of the arts in the Raleigh/Durham area, and to me he gave a simple idea.

He started by asking me if I found it important to leave a big bequest to my sons when I passed. I said not: most important that I raise them well, educate them, prepare them to live well. And brace them for the prospect that Nancy and I may live so long and so well that we consume most of our life's earnings, either through enjoyment or declining health and the medical costs that come with it. In short, they may inherit a considerable sum, or nothing, and they may be into their own retirement when this is known. Certainly nothing to rely upon, so best to get on with life.

Next he asked me if I thought it wise to spend in retirement so as to run out of money by age eighty. I said not: both Nancy and I have genetic markers and a lifestyle that could carry us well past eighty.

"Well, do you feel the need to have money available into perpetuity?", he asked.

I answered no, no one lives forever. Thus did he set the bounds of good financial planning for retirement. He suggested that I consider spending on a trajectory to run out of money at some very conservative age, like 105 or 110 years. And pointed out that in doing so, if Nancy and I then died at age 95, there would still be a large sum passing to our sons. He illustrated the point by sketching it out on a small slip of paper. Something like this:



In my work I routinely developed models that involve the amortization of mortgage loans, and so had a gut feel for the shape of the curve as money at interest runs off. So, I was able to quickly grasp Alan's point, see it for the bright and valuable idea that it was, and gratefully thank him for the insight.

In sharing this idea with a friend who had recently retired, I found he had less financial training, and so did not grasp the idea as readily as I did. I promised to build him a simple spreadsheet tool that would let him plug in his assets, age and target life expectancy, and receive a safe monthly spending rate. Once started I actually enjoy working with this sort of thing, since I get to use several of my signature strengths. In short order I had a nice little model, exceeding my initial plan, complete with graphs, and happily sent it to my friend.

He was thrilled. Now he understood the concept, and better, found that he could spend more per month than he thought possible. What a deep sense of satisfaction to help a friend through applying my talents!

And, of course, having built the model, I had to go ahead and plug in the numbers for Nancy and me. The shocker: when including our GE pensions which had already started paying, we had plenty enough to allow retirement IMMEDIATELY. And I used the model to determine that working two more years would have very little impact. Time to move on to the next phase of life!

How revealing to note that this wonderful surprise came to me while in the service of another. The rewards that come with serving others are rarely so tangible, but an important point all the same. I have since shared the simple model with many others, allowing them to think more clearly about this important life decision.

And so it is: Friendships. Wellness. Engagement. Purpose. Meaning. And with a liberal helping of travel, discovery and fun. Retirement according to Kurt.