

Retiring, but Not Shy

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A major life transition, well-recognized for men, but only in the last couple of decades for women, has been that of “retirement”, that is of leaving an occupation that has been of central importance to one’s identity over a long period of time. Recently, Ellen Cole and I have been studying this phenomenon with a group of women psychologists who have agreed to write their personal experiences about retirement from their academic life. Many are still employed, but all are over 50, and are beginning to consider this period of life to come, if not already participating in it.

In general the old notion of retirement as going to sit on the porch and rock for a few years until one’s demise has been almost completely demolished by the extended life span and high levels of health and activity among people reaching the usual retirement age of 65. Those who have left their normal jobs have created alternative life styles that are enriching, nurturing and creative. A variety of new pathways are being explored by women and men alike. The word retirement is itself retiring, as new terms are being piloted.

In my presentation I give voice to some of these emerging themes and pathways that have been developed by these women. For many, academic activities are still prominent, with the emphasis on the most actualizing facets, such as writing and professional contributions to organizations. For some, volunteering for programs involving social justice issues or community work is prominent. Learning new skills, finding adventure, and revitalizing relationships are also important. I also explore some of the fears and daunting challenges that are mentioned by this group. My major message is one of hope and creative responses to the challenges of this transition.