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Many Options for the Retiree

We can all pursue different avenues and take different approaches, writes Terry O'Banion.

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I recently read an [article in *Inside Higher Ed*](#) about retirement by my colleague William G. Tierney, a nationally known scholar in higher education who has made substantive contributions to the field. I was fascinated by his approach. He retired two years ago from the University of Southern California and shared with us the habits he had created during his tenure years that now support his successful retirement.

Based on his recommendations, some observers may say I've pretty much failed Retirement 101. My modus operandi has been quite different.

Bill and I both have one thing in common: our lack of interest in golf. I have never held a golf club in my hand, although I acknowledge one could come in handy as a weapon. (I have never held a bowling ball or a pickleball, either.)

Where we most differ, I think, is a result of our different ages. I assume Bill is in his late 60s or early 70s, which accounts for the retirement options he can pursue: meditation, fasting, memorization of poems, exercise, experiencing and experimenting, and getting involved with important social issues. I will be 86 in August, so I write this essay for my octogenarian friends who may want to consider retirement options that are more appropriate for our age group.

In the following sections, I will comment on Bill's habits in retirement followed by my own. Here's what I'd say about his habits:

Skip meditation, mindfulness and fasting. Bill does all these things, and I am sure those ventures into Buddhist-like thought help those who need to keep their minds pure and calm. But for my part, I think a perfect martini at the end of the day followed by a nicely roasted chicken from Costco accomplishes the goal.

Memorizing isn't such a good option for many of us in our 80s and 90s. Like Bill, I, too, loved memorizing the poems required in my high school English class. My favorite was William Ernest Henley's *Invictus*, which I still recite to myself often. But lately, the only lines I can remember are the last two: "I am the master of my fate. I am the captain of my soul." If we adopt this core of self-knowledge, we do not need much more wisdom.

Exercise isn't as feasible, either. Although I was an all-state basketball player in high school in the state of Florida and received an offer of a basketball scholarship from Murray State in Kentucky, I was never a fan of exercise. In fact, my habit is to strictly avoid exercise in every form. At my wife's urging, I once joined a gym and rented a locker. But the first time I mounted an exercise bike, I soon broke out in a mysterious flow of fluids from the body and escaped danger by dismounting and canceling my membership—an act that I am sure saved my life.

Public involvement in social issues isn't for all of us. Like Bill, I understand the need for it, but I restrict my efforts to voting and contributing to scholarships in my field and other worthy causes. I recognize the importance of "ceding voice and authority to those who are younger," as he put it, when it comes to climate, racism, fascism, homelessness, gun violence and ensuring democracy. I donate, but if I were really to get involved, I would need to meditate, fast and be mindful just to survive the insanity we have created in this world.

Experiencing and experimenting are no longer that enticing. I have done that all my life and do not now need to learn a new language or visit art museums to enjoy my retirement. After visiting most of the castles on the Loire River decades ago, I started to agree with a philosopher in one of the tour groups who said, "If you have seen one castle, you have seen them all."

A Different Approach

So what is my personal approach to retirement now?

I continue to contribute to higher education. I officially retired from the League for Innovation on Dec. 31, 1999, after serving as the CEO for 23 years; I was 63 years old. On the next day, the beginning of the new millennium, I continued my work as an educator and still do to this day. My work in education is so central to my self-concept and to my very identity as a human being that I cannot imagine giving it up for golf or even traveling and hiking the world.

For example, after retiring from the League, I explored ways to stay engaged in education. I consulted with the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation for two years; helped Walden University create a new doctoral program to prepare community college leaders; advised the Educational Testing Service; led a project on the nature of innovation for the MetLife Foundation; and worked with my best friend, [John Roueche](#), to create a new community college leadership program with Kansas State University. I realize that every retiree does not have these kinds of options in retirement, but you can always find ways to continue to engage in some form of good work related to your profession.

I read, as I have done all my life. Here is one pursuit postretirement that Bill and I share. Reading is one of the most exciting and relaxing activities in which you can engage. I have read everything I could find by Fyodor Dostoevsky, Oscar Wilde, Tennessee Williams and others. I have read all of the long novels of Gabriel García Márquez, and I have just ordered all of his shorter works. I find books one of the best ways to travel.

I write. After 18 books and more than 200 monographs, chapters and articles, I still find writing the focus of my personal intellectual life. In the early years, I wrote to meet the requirements to become a full professor and then to remain relevant in my field. I now write for my own pleasure, and I unleash my more provocative nature to tackle issues in the community college world that other people aren't addressing. Indeed, because I am "retired," I write more today than I have any time in my professional life. In 2021, I wrote a book and 11 articles. This year, I have already written eight articles, with more in the hopper.

I am also a published poet. My work has been included in *Best Poets of 2019*, *Who's Who in American Poetry—2021* and *Best Poets of 2021*. I have written poetry since I was a child and continue to do so today for my own self-satisfaction. I share my work with family and friends, and I simply enjoy the creation of a poem.

And I have written my memoir, *Aspiring to Poverty*, for my family. I have discovered that personal memoirs are unpublishable unless you are a very famous person or have committed a major crime. Or maybe my memoir is just not very good. (But look at that title!)

I cook. For pure relaxation, cooking is an exercise in creativity, and an appreciative audience is always at hand. Food, like books, is another way to explore the world, and I have taken full advantage of that throughout my life. I have won more than 40 ribbons—most first place—for my pies and my creative cooking at the Orange County Fair and the International Date Festival.

In sum, with my work as a senior professor of practice at Kansas State University, my reading, my writing and my cooking, I lead a very pleasant life in Palm Springs, Calif., with my wife of 40 years, for whom I am the sole caretaker. We do not exercise or even take walks, and we no longer travel because of COVID. But we greatly enjoy breakfast on the patio when the weather permits. And we especially enjoy visits from our five children, 12 grandchildren and eight great-grandchildren—all of whom expect a new pie recipe when they arrive.

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