

## OBERLIN COLLEGE CLASS OF 1965 -- 50<sup>TH</sup> REUNION

Session Summary – “What Do We Do with the Next 30 Years?”

May 23, 2015, 10 a.m. to noon.

The question, of course, is apocryphal but it was meant to stimulate us to think about what retirement, or life after a full-time job, means to us and how we are adapting to this last third of our lives. We thought that by sharing perspectives and experiences, we might help one another navigate even more comfortably than we already have this interesting passage, which we are virtually all undergoing.

Those attending were divided into seven groups, each with a facilitator. Some of the facilitators acted as rapporteurs for their groups while others (presumably the former executives among us) chose to delegate that responsibility to another in the group. Rather than prescribe a set of questions in advance, the organizers decided to let each facilitator and each group find its own way to explore the central question. What follows are some of the main themes and insights that emerged from the group discussions as they were reported back at the end of two hours to the class as a whole.

Bob Kuttner, this year's honorary degree recipient and keynote speaker at our reunion dinner, reminded us of the existential dilemma implied by the question. He quoted E.B. White: “I arise in the morning torn between a desire to improve the world and a desire to enjoy the world. This makes it hard to plan the day.” If this doesn't convey the ethos of the Class of '65, what does?

### Attitude

In the small group discussions many responses to E.B. White's dilemma emerged, ranging from “I was once concerned about changing the world but now I am focused on changing my small part of the world,” to “Retirement is about giving myself permission to do what I want, not what others want.” Many emphasized the difficulty of figuring out how to deal with the freedom represented by not having a job to go to every day:

- “I ask myself: what do I love doing when no one is telling me what to do?”
- “How do I find something enjoyable and intellectually challenging?”
- “I want to figure out how to live, not what to do. I am working hard not to feel that I have to control everything.”
- “Retirement is an ongoing process. The wrong question to ask is: ‘What can I do now that replaces what I did in the past?’ ”
- “Friends that are still employed seem to enjoy what they are doing; those who are not seem more dependent on family and friends.”

But on the other hand there are those with definite ideas about how to handle the new challenges:

- “How to enjoy retirement? Put on your own oxygen mask first!”
- “I chose not to scale down but to ramp up.”
- “I want to leave things in an intact state that will survive if I kick off tomorrow.”
- “You have to keep asking yourself, ‘What do I love doing when no one is telling me what to do?’ “
- “The key to staying engaged is using past acquired skills in a different environment.”
- “Retirement is the freedom to stop listening to NPR!” (Or perhaps it’s having the time to *start* listening to NPR! –ed.)
- “This is the time to create the room for spirituality in one’s life.”

### Activities

Several of the groups used the time to share updates on what they are doing day to day. Some have begun to compose music or to write memoirs. Others are enjoying time looking after and visiting with grandchildren. Many have become mentors or consultants, attempting to transfer some of the skills and knowledge they acquired through long careers to younger people in their fields. A very frequent refrain was the joy of attempting new things, learning new skills, or simply experiencing the pleasure of a much greater variety of activities than they were able to engage in before.

### Concerns

Not a few of us shared concerns and fears common to people as they age, to wit:

- “My circle of friends is shrinking, and at an ever faster rate.”
- “I really am very uncertain about my own future and I have too much time now to worry about it.”
- “We love our neighborhood but will we be able to stay there very much longer?”
- “I know that for my health’s sake I should be more physically active but it is a real struggle.”
- “Will I have enough money to last 15 more years, much less 30?”
- “I retired just a few weeks ago and I feel like I’m staring off into space and have lost my bearings. I have no idea what to do next.”
- “I want to leave a legacy but I’m not sure how or what it might be.”
- “For the first time in my life I am aware that not that much time remains to me. I worry about using what time I have left constructively.”

As a group, we have amassed an amazingly diverse record of experience and achievement. We all enjoyed the opportunity to hear about our classmates' lives, including all the triumphs as well as some disappointments. And we learned some fascinating things from and about classmates we may hardly have known in the years 1961-1965.

In this final utterance, one classmate remains a stubborn outlier:

"I am not retired. Here and now I invite everyone to my retirement, which will be the day of my own funeral!"

*Semper Provocante*

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-- Steve Sinding, moderator