

## **PUBLIC LIVES**

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### **Just retiring**

At the beginning of the year, I received a heart-warming e-mail from one of my former students who has kept in touch. Having heard that I would be officially retiring from teaching soon, she wanted to know if she and another classmate could attend my “last lecture.” I thanked her for her thoughtfulness, but told her, partly in jest: “Sorry, I have not prepared a final lecture; I’m just retiring, not dying.”

The allusion is, of course, to the last lecture of the 47-year-old Carnegie Mellon professor of computer science, Randy Pausch, who delivered a poignant lecture to a packed audience, in full awareness that he was going to die anytime soon of pancreatic cancer. He died a few months later, but to this day his last lecture is still reprised on YouTube.

Yes, whether one is ill or not, there’s a certain ominousness about retiring. Some think that unless you are able to find some worthwhile detours, retirement is a straight path to death. Whether one believes this to be so or not, you’re supposed to be marking time. They call it the age of mandatory retirement—that point in your life when, whether you like it or not, you’re asked to quit your job. It is sometimes set earlier, but in most countries, it happens at sixty-five. I don’t mind doing it; I wanted to do it earlier – to make room for the many young and deserving scholars our country is blessed with.

It’s January 8 as I write this, my 65th birthday, but here I am still working on this column, and still worrying how many hours it will take me this time. It feels just like any another day to me. I don’t have any extraordinary sensations about it, nor do I expect to be remembered or greeted in any special way. Indeed, I’ve pondered this moment before, wondering if my

indifference to my own personal milestones reflects a creeping nihilism, the inability to think that some things matter more than others.

But, no, I'm certain this is not my situation. I draw enormous pride in the big and small achievements of my wife, my children, and my two granddaughters. I still deeply mourn the passing of dear friends, as much as I rejoice in their successes. I continue to be touched by simple gestures of thoughtfulness by people I don't know, for people I don't know. Yet, feeling unworthy and knowing I could have done better, I myself shrink from any profuse acknowledgment of my own contributions.

When I want to clarify my feelings, I sometimes turn to poetry. And these days, the "Collected Poems" of Philip Larkin, a book that my friend, the late Daniel Boone Schirmer, took from his own library and gave to me, has served me well. Larkin has always struck me as an ironic and gloomy poet. Yet he clearly enjoyed paying tribute to his gifted friends. Here is an excerpt from a poem he wrote for his fellow British poet, Charles Causley, on the latter's 65th birthday. It's written in a style strongly reminiscent of Causley's own memorable poems for children. The deep affection cannot be missed.

One of the sadder things, I think,  
Is how our birthdays slowly sink:  
Presents and parties disappear,  
The cards grow fewer year by year,  
Till, when one reaches sixty-five,  
How many care we're still alive?  
Ah, CHARLES, be reassured! For you  
Make lasting friends with all you do,  
And all you write; your truth and sense  
We count on as a sure defence  
Against the trendy and the mad,  
The feeble and the downright bad....

Although I'm trying very hard

To sound unlike a birthday card,  
That's all this is: so you may find it  
Full of all that lies behind it –  
Admiration; friendship too;  
And hope that in the future you  
Reap ever richer revenue.

I wish I had Larkin's tremendous talent, and could write this way to honor all my friends. It would take my mind off the subtle sadness that retiring brings. My worry has little to do with dying; it has everything to do with being able to shape the day when you're no longer ruled by routine. But other than that, I do very much look forward to having all the time to read the books I have collected in the course of a lifetime of teaching, to travel around the country on my motorcycle, to do more purposeful bird-watching, and, of course, to continue writing about the things that truly matter.

To do all these, and to be able to enjoy myself doing them, I have resolved to ignore all the expectations and pronouncements of others who think they know me better than I know myself. Public images, like stereotypes, take a life of their own, and I aspire to defy them. I'm still trying to complete my life. Apart from reading, riding, writing, and birding – there are a few more lectures I'd like to give, not one of which, I hope, will be called the last. I have a few more students whose theses I have promised to see through. And I have granddaughters I want to see blossom into their first loves.

At the end of his life, and struggling to speak, the philosopher Immanuel Kant was given a sip of water mixed with sweet wine by his loyal servant and former student. He managed to mumble, in gratitude, "Sufficit" ("It is enough.") One day, not too long from now, I would love to be able to say that.

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