

What's Next?

Deciding what to do with the second half of your life.

by Phillip Moffitt

It was late summer and I had not seen him since the big day, so I was most curious and a little anxious about his state of mind. I pulled into the driveway, and he came out of the house to greet me, and we walked over and sat in chairs by his backyard swimming pool.

"How does it feel?" I asked immediately.

"Just great," he replied. "But almost everyone around here thinks I'm a little crazy."

What this man, forty-five years old, married, with two teenage boys, had done was quit his high-paying job. He had quit without any definite plans and with no intention of making any fast commitments to another job.

I asked him how his wife, who was finishing a doctoral degree herself, had handled his decision. And what about the boys, one in college and the other in high school? He told me that they'd given him their moral support, but also that they were

confused and worried and even a little angry. I was not surprised. Although he was definitely not poor, it would put a crimp in their life-style if his time off, as he called it, was to stretch to any length.

He went on to describe how good it felt to have made the change, and how he was surprised that though he had liked his work, he did not miss the office. "The strange thing was," he said, "I was actually enjoying myself more than I had in years. It was just that if I was ever going to try something different, I had to do it now."

He was not alone. In this same medium-size southern city, I knew of two other men who had made similar decisions. One, a physician in his fifties, had abandoned a very lucrative practice to take over the family carpet business after his father died. His motivation had been twofold. On the one hand, he had become somewhat disheartened by the way that modern medical practice prevented the kind of doctor-patient relationship he

valued. On the other hand, he had simply always loved rugs. The second man, a dentist turning fifty, was sharply reducing his number of patients to those he "really enjoyed working with," and was planning to compensate for his lost income by the buying and selling of various collectibles.

Again it was not a case of hating what he did; it was wanting a work experience that might offer a richer life. Other examples abound: a California real estate developer dropped out at the peak of his success. A Wall Street banker left his career early on to study psychology and "think things through." Even Mitch Kapor, the brilliant founder of the Lotus Development Corporation, announced that he was retiring at the age of thirty-five to pursue "personal interests."

What's going on here? Whatever it is, it's happening all over America. Some would say it is a phenomenon of burnout, that psychological exhaustion that bankrupts the spirit in our competitive, complex, and

driven society. That must be true in many instances, but I do not believe it is true for any of these men.

What I think is starting to occur is not a phenomenon of failure, but of success. For it is the success these men have enjoyed that has allowed them the opportunity to switch careers or simply take time off in mid-life. Part of this success is, of course, financial. But the more important element of it, I believe, is psychological. These are people with the strong self-image necessary to maintain an identity without the prop of a career or professional label: Doctor, Lawyer, Businessman.

I know a surprisingly large number of people who have chosen to undergo this process—women as well as men. Most of them have done so exactly at the time when they could have anticipated new career opportunities with greater financial rewards. I once asked one of these people—a guy who had just resigned a top ad-agency job—about what he was giving up, and he said, “Yes, maybe there’s a little drop in the standard of living, but there’s a big jump in the quality of life.”

A jump in the quality of life. That’s the real story here. Men and women who have good fortune and courage are recommitting themselves at the midpoint of their careers to those ideals and dreams they had at the beginning of their adult lives. It means a second career, or no career but just a job, or going back to school. It means less money, or gambling with the money they’ve got, or giving up

their chances at the big money. It means answering the question, What am I going to do with the second half of my life? I believe there will be a steady increase in the next ten years in the number of people who undergo this process. We have lived through an era of high materialism and emphasis on individual achievement. It is coming to an end. It began in the early 1970s with the rapid rise in the number of young professionals, with the shock of an unsteady economy and the frightening blows of high inflation. It has flowered during the years of the Reagan presidency, and it will wind down between now and the mid-1990s.

Two reasons for this change stand out. The first is a general realization that if the only game in town is material success, there will be few winners. For only a small percentage of the population can ever be very rich or very prominent. A new emphasis will emerge that allows for many more winners. The second reason for the change is a growing awareness of the limits of individual achievement. It means little to be individually affluent, urban or suburban, if you live a life without community, or in fear of crime, or with the threat of a deteriorating environment.

The phrase one hears to describe this new emphasis is “the quality of life.” Ironically, it was first seen with a major shift in consumer spending toward quality goods and services and is now becoming visible in dramatic career shifts. A new generation of people are now in their forties, and they can see ahead to

what they are likely to obtain in income and achievement levels. What is happening with individuals like my friends is that they are realizing it is in their interest to sacrifice some economic payoff for more general satisfaction with their lives. It may appear to be naïve or somehow overly idealistic, but it is really a “bottom line” type of computation, which measures net happiness rather than net dollars.

Over the next decade, this attitude is likely to be felt in the political arena, with increasing support for a social agenda built around the “common good.” Only in a time of perceived prosperity, such as the present, or in a time of economic chaos, such as the 1930s, can the common good clearly outweigh individual achievement. As the 1990s approach and people start to spend more time on non-economic interests, they will also realize that the political process can provide better “human services” that can add to everyone’s sense of well-being.

Gary Hart stumbled upon this new shift in the 1984 primaries, but was too transparently opportunistic and quickly lost his initial momentum. New York governor Mario Cuomo has become a national political figure by beautifully articulating thoughts that touch upon the theme of the common good—but without an agenda for achieving it. In fact, for a social agenda for the common good to have political power, it must be expressed in practical terms that appeal to people’s self-interest.

My three friends, who do not even know one another, would be amazed to learn that someone sees them as part of a societal value shift, for they are consumed by their individual struggles and are basically apolitical. Yet the man sitting by his pool that day went on to describe to me with total enthusiasm how he had gotten involved helping the chamber of commerce plan for the growth of the city, and how much he was enjoying it. The doctor confessed that he still works one day a week as a physician, but in a city clinic program. As for the dentist, he became involved in helping a paraplegic, a young woman for whom he developed a new, light-metal mouth stick that allowed her greater dexterity without pain or fatigue. I asked him what the reaction had been to this innovation (which had been written up in the city paper), and he said everybody's question was, "Have you patented it yet?" "Well?" I asked. He shrugged and said, "You gotta be there to see how much this is needed by so many. It should not be patented. It should be in the public domain!"

At first I thought I was making all this up, seeing isolated instances as a trend that really only existed in my imagination. But a few months ago, I was invited to attend a planning retreat for the faculty, staff, and trustees of the largest professional school of psychology in the U.S. They were attempting to propose an agenda to see their school to the year 2000. I listened with amazement as, over the few days it took, there developed a consensus: almost unanimously they wished to switch their primary focus away from private-practice psychology—where the big money is—to a social practice for society's underprivileged, and to make social advocacy a part of their stated purpose.

I occasionally lunch with the partners in a future-trends company that tries to identify social change before it becomes social trend. This man and woman are very smart, and it is fascinating to hear them describe the subtle signs they see that are so easy to miss. I recently explained my hypothesis about career switching, time off, and a different emphasis in the second half of life. They had not only

already isolated a similar pattern of occurrences, but had a phrase to describe it: "cooling out." To them, cooling out means a generation returning to family values, a slower-paced life, a feeling of community.

Cooling out. I like that phrase. Maybe that is the real lowdown on my friends and what I am seeing as I travel this country. Social change is almost always a ground swell that begins with the response of a group of people to a problem or frustration. Their example inevitably spreads, as the media and social observers report and comment on it. In 1980, I almost never encountered people struggling with these kinds of life changes, but now it is a common occurrence. It has certainly worked in this manner with me. As I talk with these people, I find it adds to my own restlessness and makes me question myself as I, too, struggle with what to do with the rest of my life.