What, Me Retire?
Every day, 10,000 Baby Boomers turn 65. The issue of what to do after “retirement” is faced by tens of millions of men and women as they retire, or much earlier, when they sell a family business or are laid off without much hope of obtaining a comparable job. Many, perhaps most, of this group have no idea how to think about what to do next.

The question then becomes what a person should do when, in their 50s or 60s, they stop what they have been doing for most of their lives. That moment should not automatically be seen as an ending or retirement, which connotes a stepping back, but as the beginning of the third great stage in life. The decision about what to do for the next 10 to 20 years is one of the most challenging and least well-marked in our lives. It is filled with uncertainty, fears, surprises and unknown ground, but the rewards of that period can be extraordinary.

That transition is a critical and magical moment in life. It raises for everyone the question of “what’s next?” Framing it that way requires a series of crucial and tough decisions. Many of these issues have been explored joyfully in *The Big Shift: Navigating the New Stage Beyond Midlife*, by Marc Freedman, one
of the earliest and most thoughtful observers of these issues.

The moment is magical because it is one of the few times that afford a real opportunity to consciously shape a major stage of life. Ordinarily, the move to the next job is prompted by a call from a search firm or a potential new employer, or the realization that the future in one’s current job is not bright. Sometimes one decides to stay in place.

In the third stage, a very different set of considerations come into play. Staying in place is not an option. The issue is not whether to take an important step, but which step to take: retirement or a new career in the private or the nonprofit sector? Considerations of ambition and monetary rewards become muted at this point, because it can be difficult for most people to make significant changes in either management responsibility or income when they start on a different track at this stage of life.

What are the major questions to be faced in considering which way to move? To lay bare my biases in this discussion, I spent about 30 years as an associate and partner at a New York law firm. Along the way, I had three stints of government service and two as general counsel of a large securities firm and a large life insurance company. At the age of 66, I started a new career as a law school dean and a university president.

Why not just retire?

Old fashioned retirement is, of course, a real option if one’s financial condition makes it realistic. Retirement brings great personal freedom of a sort that most people have never experienced in their business lives. The origin of most of the constraints and obligations in our lives shift from being heavily external — a boss, dealing with corporate silos and competing business units, seemingly endless meetings and, if one is in a personal service business, getting and working with clients and customers. All of that disappears in full retirement. The constraints become self-imposed and voluntarily assumed. As responsibilities fall away, there usually is a corresponding drop in the level of stress, including stress that was often not fully appreciated. For many, it feels great! So the first question to be faced is whether to stop working.

One observer put it well when he wrote that retirement is the end of all possibility of failure — but also the end of all possibility of success. That observation captures the retirement dilemma neatly. If it is important to continue to grow as a person, to learn new things, to meet a lot of new people of all ages who are deeply involved in what they are doing, and to handle new kinds of problems, one must take on significant challenges and assume responsibility. It is those opportunities, not whether one is paid, that define “work.” Indeed, studying for an advanced degree, or becoming serious about piano or painting lessons, are endeavors that cost rather than earn money. But make no mistake — they are work. Along with that work comes constraints on personal freedom, new stress and the possibility of failure. Also, retirement means the loss of externally imposed structure for one’s life, and for many people the loss of that structure is a serious problem.

When does one need to start thinking about the third stage?

Early! It is important to start thinking through these issues at least a year, and preferably two or three, before retirement — assuming one has adequate notice that a change is coming. Most men and women in their 50s and 60s are immersed in their business or profession and have given little or no thought to the next phase of life. Finding a new career and restructuring one’s life require a lot of time and long conversations with a spouse or partner and friends.

Even if one has a clear idea about the kind of new career that would be desirable, in most cases that involves finding a new job as an “unconventional candidate,” which takes time and is filled with false starts. It is certainly not impossible or even that difficult, but it demands perseverance, patience and a willingness to tolerate a lot of rejection.

How about the nonprofit sector?

A transition to the nonprofit sector should be considered seriously. The additional psychic income can be substantial, even in nonprofit jobs involving significant compensation. Many nonprofits, even large organizations, are thinly staffed and short on business and financial skills and experience. They need the same kind of accounting, financial, legal and marketing and communication expertise as private sector companies, and there is a substantial component of general management in leading a large nonprofit. Larger organizations like universities, museums and hospitals have significant departments in those areas as well as groups with construction and property acquisition and maintenance experience.

Smaller nonprofits cannot afford to have a full-time, highly experienced staff with those backgrounds, and someone willing to work less than full time at a comparatively low compensation can be an incredibly valuable addition. The variety of nonprofit organizations is great, ranging from helping young people, K-12 and higher education, the homeless, government service, public policy think tanks, the performing arts, museums, health care organizations, religious organizations, and on and on; there are objects of nonprofit work for every taste.

It should be noted that in some cases, there is still a surprising mistrust on the part of many nonprofit CEOs about the ability of someone from the business world to transition successfully to a very different culture, and it is useful to have had substantial nonprofit experience, at the board level or otherwise.

The usefulness of fundraising experience is often overrated except for board memberships. Most substantial nonprofits have a highly professional fundraising group that will only be interested in a person with extensive fundraising or sales experience. Those joining nonprofits in other roles are seldom expected to be substantial fundraisers unless they are in a general management position, such as a college dean or the head of a hospital department or an executive director.

If one decides to move toward the nonprofit sector, it is worthwhile to look at the Chronicle of Philanthropy and the Chronicle of Higher Education, monthly publications that are not only the basic repository for job listings in the nonprofit world, but also a wonderful
source of insight about the current concerns of the kind of institutions that may be of interest. There are also a variety of organizations that place executives with nonprofits — for example, Professionals for Nonprofits (www.nonprofitstaffing.com) and National Executive Service Corps (www.nesc.org).

Why not just keep working but with fewer hours?

It is a realistic alternative for many professionals — doctors, lawyers, accountants, consultants, etc. — to simply continue their practice at a reduced level. The good news is that it doesn’t require looking for a new job and, unlike embarking in a wholly new area, one enjoys a reservoir of experience and expertise to draw upon. The transition is easy and the risk of failure is low. The bad news is that it involves forgoing one of the great opportunities presented by this transition — the challenge, excitement and satisfaction of doing something very different — learning a new area, interacting with a new group of talented people and having an entirely new set of satisfactions.

In general, this is not a viable route for someone who has spent his or her career in general management at a medium-sized or large company. Those companies are usually not organized to take advantage of the skills and experience of a senior part-time workforce, although the retirement of the Baby Boom cohort is creating gaps that many companies may be able to fill only with part-time, semi-retired boomers.

Many senior executives in family-owned businesses believe they can reduce their workload and stay in place while the torch is being passed to the next generation or to professional management, but working under those circumstances is a tricky undertaking that often leads to major conflict.

Why not work in a new area part-time or on a project basis?

Why not, indeed? In conversations with men and women contemplating retirement, this always comes up as a preferred route, sometimes coupled with a dream of working part-time in Palm Beach or Tuscany. Nice if one can find it. There are organizations dedicated to placing talented retirees with nonprofits on a project basis, usually as a volunteer. Our economy, however, including the nonprofit sector, is not generally organized to offer paid part-time or project work.

As a consequence, for most executives the choice will be between full-time work or a more conventional retirement. Full-time work, including working at a nonprofit, involves the sacrifice of many of the advantages of retirement — there is not much more time to smell the flowers than in any other full-time job. Retirement is an intensely personal decision, turning upon whether one can generate enough stimulation and personal growth in a life composed of family, various projects, volunteer activities, interests and hobbies. There are often conflicting considerations. For example, if a younger wife is working, the husband’s retirement can put strains on a marriage, especially if she is at the peak of her career. She may have no interest in following him into retirement at that time. Some husbands who have been the primary earner in
the family have emotional difficulty in adjusting to having no
earned income, especially if their wives continue to work and have
substantial incomes. These issues need to be confronted squarely,
both within the family and perhaps with a professional counselor.

Do not be afraid to look at jobs that seem to involve a new
nonprofit “world” or a new skill set.
The plain fact is that most people find it scary to contemplate do-
ing something they have never done before. The risk of failure
rears its ugly head again and, to an ironic degree, it is those who
feel they have been successful in their careers who are often most
sensitive to the risk of failure in the third stage. Giving in to that
fear at the outset of considering a new course is a mistake. The
person responsible for filling a job will do enough rejecting for
both sides. But if that person is prepared to consider an unconven-
tional candidate seriously, it is because he or she believes that the
candidate has the qualities they are looking for.

Most people have a narrow view of “their world” and the appli-
cability of their skills and experience. In my own initial planning, I
had not considered academia, and it had never occurred to me that
becoming a law school dean, no less a university president, was a
possibility. It was the process of talking with friends and academic
search committees, learning more about the challenges facing
American law schools, and mentally “trying on” the role of a law
dean, that illuminated the degree of applicability of my skill set
and experience to the demands of a deanship. My three years as
dean at Pace Law School put me on a very steep learning curve, but
they were among the most satisfying, challenging and fun years of
my life. They called on all of the skills and experience I had ac-
quired through a long career in the law and in government – and
then some. But most of those skills and that experience were there.
They simply needed to be assembled in a different way and applied
in a different context. One often has more of the pieces of the puz-
zel required for a new job than one thinks. The opportunity to lead
Pace University as president for the past eight years has been a
truly extraordinary and wonderfully gratifying experience.

Enjoy the liberation from ambition.
Throughout a career, a lot of energy is put into thinking about how
to advance and be promoted, or how to become a partner, or how
to make more money. In the third stage of life, ambition plays
much less of a role because it is hard to do much about it at this
stage. There are new satisfactions in doing a job primarily for the
contribution one can make, its intrinsic interest, and the gratifica-
ton that comes with helping others or working in a worthy cause.
It is a wonderful feeling. Moreover, it has a national and social
significance as well. Given the exponential growth in the number
of retiring Baby Boomers, the talent, skills and experience of this
group is a resource that our country cannot afford to lose.

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