

# The Loss of Work: Notes from Retirement

by THOMAS H. FITZGERALD

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*Take some time to pursue an adventure of your own.*

# The Loss of Work: Notes from Retirement

by THOMAS H. FITZGERALD

After a lifetime of work, the career was over. The news came suddenly one afternoon. An organizational consolidation would eliminate my position in middling executive ranks and permit my early retirement. First, disbelief, then gratitude: "I won't ever have to work again!" The endless weekend. A pardon from the governor, after so many years.

But soon after the door clicked shut behind me, I felt unexpectedly disoriented. It was like a traffic accident, I've come to think: one minute you're just driving along and the next you're looking up from the pavement. One day I had a wide office, a big desk and management-level chair, my own secretary, even a walnut credenza to hide junk in. The next day I was sitting home in a sweater and corduroys watching the snow fall outside.

The isolation intensified. Weeks passed, and never a call from any of the people I had so often worked with, traveled with, lunched with. Incredible. Until I realized that I had done exactly the same to those who had retired before me. Nothing personal; they

merely became the disappeared. Occasionally, one of them would turn up at the office to check on his benefits or whatever, and then we'd remember, "There's old Charlie!" Well, I would not display myself as another of those has-beens.

Nor, in fact, was there much of anything I wanted to do. Now that the demands, expectations, implicit rules—the pushes and pulls of organizational life—had been removed, I was curiously disabled. It was as if my capacity for having intentions had atrophied by long attention to the wishes of others. Images came to mind of the old family servant, finally let out with a small pension, who sits about waiting for the pub to open; or the long-term con who at last stands outside the gates, suitcase in hand, but with no place he can think of to go. Now that freedom was here, it was without content. For someone who had valued it as I had, the experience was chastening.

Considering how I started out, my years in a blue-chip corporation would have seemed unlikely. I was a boy during the Great Depression and grew up in New Jersey with a working-class outlook. In those days, most work was hard, unsafe, and it wore men out. Yet the loss of work was a terrible event, especially to men with large families. Few women worked outside the house, and people had to be destitute to get on relief. My parents' families were mostly clerks—none of your computer excitement then—and they used to urge us to learn a trade so as not to slip down into the poorer world of navvies, or "ditch diggers" as they were called. No one ever spoke of having a career but rather of having work or of their hopes for getting employment. Priests sometimes talked of having a vocation, but we understood that meant a calling to religious life.

From my father I learned to see work as security. He worried so, in the 1930s, about losing out the next time the employer's roll was cut. A captive of the tradition in which fathers did not share their responsibility for the family's welfare, he was baffled and chronically discouraged by the cruelties of the economic system.

He got by with various jobs during much of that long decade. But at dinnertime he talked of this

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or that fellow who had been laid off or of hungry people in other cities who he'd heard were picking scraps out of garbage cans. During a long strike at the shipyard there was no paycheck for some months, and the main meal every day was a pot of soup. "You can *live* on that," he would say, as if living itself was a small victory—which I suppose it was.

All this made us rather serious children, grateful for kindnesses and aware of our vulnerability. On summer nights, workmen in knit undershirts would sit together on the steps of tenements drinking beer from tin pails. On Sundays, Italians raced pigeons from rickety cages on high flat roofs, while my German grandfather played pinochle through the afternoon with his cronies in the back of his penny-candy store. I knew even then there was life beyond that shabby neighborhood. My father used to bring home old issues of the *National Geographic* bought for a few cents at second-hand book stands, and I would look at the pages of pictures over and over, hoping to go some day to those faraway tropical places (now known as LDCs).

To be sure, the parochial schools I attended helped form my view of the adult world, as schools always do in one way or another. The nuns would tell their small charges of our fallen condition, of the need to be forgiven; they implied that grace was earned, not universally bestowed. The Seven Deadly Sins—a litany now forgotten—included a condemnation of sloth. Occasionally, there was a whipping or verbal shaming of a child, a far cry from the self-expression now promoted in middle-class schools. That training in obedience and docility—the hidden curriculum—was not without future value in getting a job and pleasing the boss enough to keep it.

I dropped out of school at 16 to help support the family. I was, after all, the eldest son. Although I had been delivering newspapers and groceries, my first real job was as a messenger in the financial district of downtown New York. There, in a silly uniform and cap, I walked the streets in any kind of weather to bring cablegrams to the outer offices of white-collar America. Because I was a polite, helpful sort of lad, someone eventually brought me inside where I was able to better myself. The company was steady and secure, and I might have been stuck there forever had not the army found me.



Military service did not improve my attitude toward work. If anything, it brought out all my latent doubts. Recruits, however patriotic, were ordered about by arrogant noncoms; the latter reminded me of my worst bosses and foreshadowed some of the factory foremen I would meet later on. They had that same style of command: the way to get work done was to order people about.

In the army I learned that when we labor under coercion and disparagement, we do so grudgingly and infect each other with the resentment of the indentured. By chance, after shipment to Europe, I found an obscure corner in military government where I spent months without having to work seriously. It seemed not only luxury but also a successful evasion of the system.

The time lost during the war was recovered in a subsidy for attending college, which I supplemented with a series of jobs. But by then a stiff-spined independence showed through my clerky veneer. My home, and being away from home, had strengthened my character but left me ambivalent toward authority. This ambivalence I've never been able to shake, though eventually it hit me that there is a better freedom than escaping the demands of others; that freedom *from* is not the same as freedom *to*. After the army, I failed to see beyond the

negative kind—freedom from the direction of officers and bosses. The alternative freedom is the ability to cultivate and use one's unique talents. That is possible only in the company of others.

Two events helped to change my course. While in graduate school in the Midwest, I finally ran out of savings. There was a recession, and I could not find work anywhere; I was broke and, for a while, actually cold and hungry. I had to get serious.

Not long thereafter I met my first wife. Her father was a self-made man, a real-life entrepreneur who ran a prospering business. He was a great bundle of energy and enterprise, immune to any of the equivocal feelings I've described. His example inspired me to look for a good job, one with "a future." (Later, when I got to know him better, I saw how he could play the tyrant at his factory and again at home, but was not, for all of that, happy.)

The false starts were not quite over. I lost a promising job when the agency where I spent my next year was shut down. Coincidentally, it provided an intro-



duction to General Motors, which took me on as a management trainee—a ticket to ride on the mobility escalator.

During the period of my internship, I was able to move about and see a good deal of the company's operations. I was also able to spend time with a good number of its employees, who had worked for years in one plant or another, sometimes at the very same tasks. They came mostly from small towns or the rural South. I can barely speak of them without sounding either patronizing or sentimental, but they had a certain gritty integrity and an understanding of their situation that the labor statistics did not convey.

Nevertheless, it did not take very long for me to acquire a certain snobbishness. And after a lengthy tour in the field, I was invited into the officers' club. A management position meant I did not become stranded in the many backwaters of the organization. New and different assignments were offered me: fly out somewhere and let us know what's going on; give an address to one group or negotiate with another; look at the pieces of a problem and put things back together. I did my job well enough, and further opportunities followed.

Each time I learned something new, but I also became more cautious and controlled. That kind of experience alters not only the person visible to others but the sense of who you are. On the other hand, it was easy to forget that the stage, costumes, script—the house itself—belonged the whole time to somebody else.

During the 1950s, the idea of pursuing a career had not yet replaced "getting ahead." For most of us, success in very large organizations was not primarily a matter of brilliance and daring or, certainly, of displaying the traits found on employee appraisal forms. It resulted from astute attention to detail, from thinking ahead to offset threats to one's hegemony. It was the reward for deference to and getting along with the level just above, being trustworthy when out on the road, staying visible back at the office—for looking like a person with "potential." I am tempted to add that I did a lot of hard work. But then, legions of men and women work hard and never get anywhere.

These thoughts were not exactly reassuring for someone in human resource management, which is

where I landed and remained for several years. At first, HRM appeared rational and professional compared with the creaking antiquities who ran personnel, and I was one of its early evangelists. Besides, it gave me a chance to show off my education (college graduates had not yet taken over). In any case, my faith in HRM did not survive my tenure. Its language tended toward high-minded slogans; its buried assumptions presented the work force as a sort of recalcitrant object requiring both mobilization and pacification. By the time I moved on, I saw HRM types as far less attractive than their promises—outwardly friendly handshakers, privately gossipy and

petty backbiters. Blandly they denied the existence of conflict, but you didn't forget that they kept the files on each employee.

My evolving disillusionment with HRM would be of little more than anecdotal interest here were it not for the way it prompted me to think through the deeper connections between work and self. HRM trivialized what I now realize is so positive about work: the way it can bring out the best in us, not as human resources but as human beings.

Work, I've learned, provides the ground for standing in the world. It is a vehicle for transcending our adolescent dependency, to achieve the confidence of self-reliance. We gain the respect of

others by showing we can earn our own way through visible competence of one sort or another. We cannot be shaped in isolation. Work provides the necessary audience for trying out new hats and different voices. It is the arena for being tested against the expectations of others and for finding our own comfortable balance between initiative and compliance. Crafts that survive do so because apprentices have come to accept for themselves the standards of workmanship set down by older members of the craft.

For myself, work was a place where I became occupied with others and their tasks, and I accepted responsibility for both. Such involvement with others in work can bring an escape from the self. This is not a calculated payoff but for a while it can seem a blessing: I managed to become a moderate success during the 1960s and lived quite well, having everything my parents would have admired.

And yet my confusion of security with plenty—my over-valuing of both—now seems an incredible lack of imagination. Not that my restlessness faded. I con-





tinued to resent being locked up during the best part of the day, with little time left when I came home at night to the family. For years, work ate up the center of my life, leaving only crusts. In spite of this—perhaps because of it—I bound myself even tighter to the organization.

In that same era, a few others on the inside were turning away from the single-minded dedication to success and were even, sometimes noisily, dropping out. I blame only myself for the hardening wall that separated my private self from the public one, but back then, who knew what or whom to blame? My marriage did not survive those days, although I declined to dissolve the union with my corporate spouse. It did not occur to me that, inevitably, the company would divorce me.

Most people think of work as what they do for a living, yet perhaps only in retirement they discover it is much of whom they have become. When we abandon work, or it abandons us, we always leave part of ourselves behind; but if we have allowed work to absorb most of ourselves and our days, we leave even more. The problem then is this: Do we simply continue as a “former manager” or do we decide to go on and become something else? A famous novelist once observed: “There are no third acts in American lives.” An unacceptable conclusion, surely, for some of us who are standing around in full costume, feeling unfinished, and wanting to go on—even if our lines must be improvised.

And yet I remain skeptical of the popular remedies for the retired worker's fate—mental health counseling, for example, with its professional aplomb and ready answers. A support group is often suggested, but such meetings imply hasty comforting and solicitude when one might do better to confront past choices. Nor would I ask government to fund recreational specialists to instruct us in “creative leisure” for our many free hours. Perhaps my sympathies remain with the people of my earlier life who didn't have hobbies, who didn't “recreate.”

Some companies now offer preretirement seminars. While these efforts may be well-intentioned and can review necessary information like insurance coverages, pensions, and so on, the package programs I have looked into are mindlessly cheerful, with pep talks about becoming a “lifetime learner.” Isn't it unreasonable to expect the consultants who design such materials to solve the inner dislocations, the predicament of leaving behind the central piece of our former selves? Whether we jump or are thrown overboard, what if not our condition is our own problem?

In what turned out to be my last assignment for the company, I was asked to head up a large program to promote participation in job improvements by both salaried and blue-collar employees. I welcomed the opportunity to get back in contact with people in

A paradox of retirement:  
the more work taxed you, the  
more you'll miss it.

the broad base of the organization, and to show that tapping their energy makes good business sense. By that time, too, others had begun to realize that pushing workers around resulted in shoddy work; that rigidly hierarchical structures had become, in the context of our populist society, a source of enervation and failure, robbing work of its spontaneity and generosity.

Anyway, in working on the project I got a preview of the paradox that plagues us in retirement: that the worse work is the more we need it. Jobs that used none of those blue-collar workers' creative powers were dulling and flattening. So when work was lost, they were lost.

That cliché about how our sense of community is eroded in big cities obscures a true loss—loss of generational linkages, of neighbors, friends, and relations who help make the world appear to be personal. Without these people the job becomes one of the last places to nourish an adult identity. What you don't anticipate when you lose your job is that you also lose membership in a community. Shut out of the circle you took for granted, you miss not only those others but your old self as well.

Once while driving to a business meeting, I missed a turn in the back streets of an industrial district and stopped at a tavern to ask directions. Inside, on all the seats along the bar and at many of the tables, were older men. It was barely 10 o'clock in the morning. I recall Barbara Pym's *Quartet in Autumn*: retired workers, she writes, are “swept away as if they had never been.”

Many who read this will not be eligible to retire for years, yet might wonder about it. Where to go for answers? How to prepare? I would not recommend that you attempt to discuss these matters with the personnel department.

Talking to people who are already retired is a possibility, but the question, “What do you do with all your spare time?” sounds like prying into another's subsidized idleness. Besides, our separate lives cannot be collected into tidy piles. We may share a common situation, but each life is as different as our



faces. The best that one can expect from another's account of retirement are questions with which to await one's own impending crisis—in short, my intention here.

And so consider how your day goes there in Marketing, or Engineering, or Finance, or Distribution: conferring endlessly, making recommendations to solve problems and having them listened to, seeing joint projects through to completion, flying around to check on activity at the branches. The density of these days easily discourages thinking about what it will be like when all is lost at a stroke, when no one (except perhaps your spouse) cares what you think about anything—you who were once well-paid for your views.

Even in the public sector, as a citizen with legitimate claims on official attention, you will find yourself of less consequence without letterhead and affiliation. Some of those retirees from my old company, knowing more intuitively than I that the game was really over, just gave up all claims to attention. They are reported to be living in quiet corners like Scottsdale where there's golf every day, or Longboat Key where one can putter endlessly with fishing gear. Not a small achievement on this crowded and dangerous planet.

Do I overstate? Possibly. But if you expect to make good use of your postretirement years, you cannot put off thinking about them until the week or month

before you are awarded the gold watch. Now is the time to ask, "How might one live? What do I really care about? What is of value and worth?" These are not easy questions to ponder in the company of burly utilitarians crowding around the big buffet. If you attempt to escape them, however, these questions will return with a peculiar intensity when, with time running out, you are severed from all those who confirm your powers.

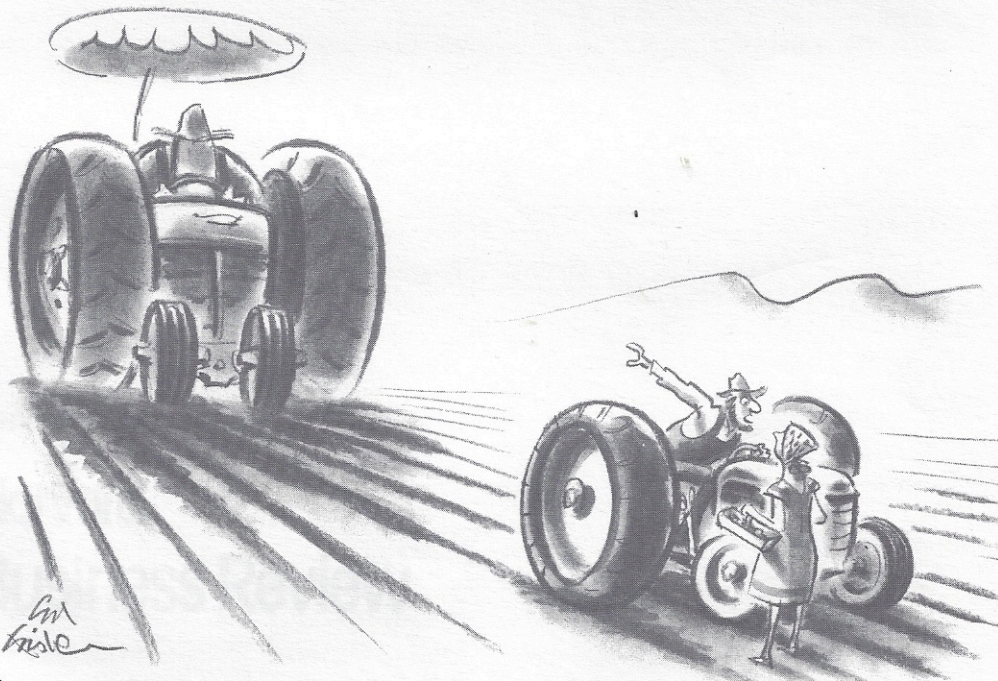
Start with a simple assertion of yourself, however symbolic. Take off some time to pursue an adventure wholly your own. Get connected with other people whose exotic skills you admire, people with a different outlook. For me, today, living means doing something of no greater importance—and no less—than mending a broken chair, speaking up at a public meeting, or, indeed, writing this article. The point is to learn to do something for its own sake.

For those who have recently retired, I feel a special affinity, and I want to extend an invitation. Imagine this time as one of life's border crossings, one that brings you to a small clearing—an open space—between arrival and departure. It is a place for quiet conversation with a circle of attentive listeners. Is it too late to reawaken desire after it has been numbed? Is there still opportunity—and courage—to pursue a calling, a project of one's own?

Indeed, we have much to talk about.



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