

On Not “Dying on Third”

BY ROBERT M. NEWELL

Aging well and continuing to serve Jesus requires a deliberate counter-cultural response to much that is taken for granted about retirement from work. God wants us to remain active and alert in meaningful ways, always “in the game” before we reach “home.”

Mr. Spock, the science officer and first officer of the starship *Enterprise*, is remembered for his Vulcan salute and the blessing, “Live long and prosper.” Leonard Nimoy, the actor who created the Spock character in the original *Star Trek* television series and movies, admits his idea for the gesture (a raised hand with palm forward, fingers parted between the middle and the ring finger, and thumb extended) and blessing came from his Jewish heritage. Nimoy recalls his Orthodox priest raising both hands in a similar manner to bless the congregants during the High Holiday services. The gesture probably represents the Hebrew letter Shin as shorthand for *Shaddai*, the Almighty, which is the name of God known to Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob (Exodus 6:3).¹

I never doubted that God wanted a long, fruitful, and meaningful life for me. I agree with the Apostle Paul that “we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do” (Ephesians 2:10, NIV).² I always wanted my work to be worship and am deeply honored to be a part of God’s work on earth. This attitude comes from my father, a small businessman who confirmed the compelling side of the Protestant work ethic. Through his business integrity he exhibited his love for God and our family, and he demonstrated God’s love for the world.

As a boy of fourteen, I began to sense God’s call to ministry, in both the universal and professional senses of that word. As I matured into the wider implications of that marvelous impression, I realized that clergy, like other professionals, often “grow weary in well-doing” (Galatians 6:9, KJV), espe-

cially in the later years of their service. I prayed for good life-planning and the Holy Spirit's dynamic leadership to keep God's call alive and growing.

As a professor and administrative dean at Houston Baptist University, I also served twenty-one times as interim pastor. In those experiences I observed some pastors who had not planned well and who felt trapped during their later years. With a constricted focus and inadequate preparation, they found little flexibility and few options in their service to God. When I became a permanent pastor, I discovered many committed followers of Jesus whose work cessation brought on a kind of spiritual malaise. They had narrowly framed their contribution to God's kingdom around their occupation, which left them feeling little spiritual value when their work ended.

When my wife, Janice, and I began to experience our own aging and the approach of retirement, in what some may have taken to be (in Dylan Thomas's words) our "rage against the dying of the light," we chose not to bow predictably before the golden calf of retirement. Since idolatry in any form, including the idolatry of retirement, always disappoints, we asked God for a new challenge. Our gracious God provided what some have called an "encore career." It was an eleven-year, thrilling, new expression of our callings, far removed from the wealthy, upper-income congregation where I was then pastoring. We were guided by our grasp of God's ongoing and developing will and by the skills and varied experience God had given us. The vision of innovative ministry among the "least reached" through the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship and our God-engendered love for Albanian people aided our stubborn insistence that we would not retire until later. These factors and our willingness to uproot and reinvent ourselves and acquire two additional languages combined to carry us from our lovely home on the lake in suburban Houston, Texas, to an expression of our callings among the working class and outcast Albanian immigrants in the ancient city of Athens, Greece.



The evangelist Billy Graham, as he nears one hundred years of age, acknowledges the contemporary church's ineffectiveness in helping a follower of Jesus to live appropriately in the years immediately preceding death. "All my life I was taught how to die as a Christian, but no one ever taught me how I ought to live in the years before I die," he writes in *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well*. "I wish they had because I am an old man now, and believe me, it's not easy."³

While many find genuine help in living the Christian life by asking "What would Jesus do?" for this circumstance Jesus left no specific model to emulate. Because he was crucified in his thirties, he did not grow old as many do today. If we assume that in his earthly work Jesus followed the trade of Joseph, the carpenter of Nazareth, then Jesus was in that sense self-employed. So, even if he had lived to old age, he would not have experienced the termination many modern workers go through when they receive a "pink slip" or "gold

watch" or "golden parachute" at the end of their working lives.

Retirement is not a biblical concept. On only one occasion in the Bible is there anything close to the idea. When Moses is dedicating the tribe of Levi as the Hebrews' ceremonial priests, God tells him they should cease their priestly duties at the age of fifty. At that point "they must retire from their regular service and work no longer. They may assist their brothers in performing their duties at the Tent of Meeting, but they themselves must not do the work" (Numbers 8:25b-26a, NIV). Retirement is a comparatively recent phenomenon, a modern contrivance. Mary-Lou Weisman humorously notes:

In the beginning, there was no retirement. There were no old people. In the Stone Age, everyone was fully employed until age 20, by which time nearly everyone was dead, usually of unnatural causes. Any early man who lived long enough to develop crow's-feet was either worshiped or eaten as a sign of respect. Even in Biblical times, when a fair number of people made it into old age, retirement still had not been invented and respect for old people remained high. In those days, it was customary to carry on until you dropped, regardless of your age group — no shuffleboard, no Airstream trailer. When a patriarch could no longer farm, herd cattle or pitch a tent, he opted for more specialized, less labor-intensive work, like prophesying and handing down commandments. Or he moved in with his kids.⁴

Chancellor Otto Von Bismarck of Germany is credited as the inventor of the modern concept of retirement. Leading his country to offset the rising threat of Marxism, he announced in 1883 that he would pay a pension to any German man over the age of 65 who was not working. Since in those pre-modern-medicine days few people lived to reach 65, the immediate payout of Bismarck's proposal was small. But the discovery of penicillin and other medical advances in the twentieth century soon changed the picture dramatically.⁵

If my story and that of others can be instructive in any way, it is that aging well and continuing to serve Jesus requires a deliberate counter-cultural offensive in the face of much that is taken for granted. Growing up in Mississippi, I was taught not to "get too set in my ways," and I have found that advice to be helpful in my later years. Of course, one cannot discount the modern obsession with youth and the marked diminishing of energy or other realities of aging. The growing complexity of our work world and the cultural fixation on the "good life" of retirement also complicate matters. But, I have found fulfillment in remaining active and working longer. Indeed, in the recent economic crises, and given better medicines and other considerations, many people are revisiting the cultural norm and choosing not to retire.⁶



The title of Graham's book, *Nearing Home*, borrows an image from the world of baseball by referring to aging and death as "nearing home base." To expand on that metaphor, let's remember that each one of us, in our youth, trains and prepares. When our time "at bat" comes, we enter the world of work. Seeking guidance "signs" from the "Coach," most of us get "on base" with our first job. Unless health issues or severe economic conditions "throw us out," we remain in the "game" of life. We advance around the "bases" of our life's work, often aided or impeded by the "hits," "force-outs," and "sacrifices" of others, but also by our own ability to "play the game" and "run the bases." Some have even been known to "steal a base" or two. Finally we reach "third base," the summit of our careers. That significant time period, whether long or short in duration, between the conclusion of our working and the end of our lives is represented by the distance between "third base" and "home." No player wants to "die on third." For the sake of our "team," we want to make a contribution, even late in the game. I am convinced that the Coach also wants us to remain active and alert in meaningful ways, always in the game before we reach home.

Once, when Saint Francis of Assisi (c. 1181-1228) was working in his garden, someone asked him what he would do if he suddenly learned he would die before sunset on that very day. Francis replied, "I would finish hoeing my garden."⁷

Amen and Amen!

NOTES

1 Leonard Nimoy, *I Am Not Spock* (Cutchogue, NY: Buccaneer Books, 1997 [1975]), 104-105.

2 Scripture passages marked "NIV" are from THE HOLY BIBLE, NEW INTERNATIONAL VERSION® NIV®, Copyright © 1973, 1978, 1984 by International Bible Society®. Used by permission. All rights reserved worldwide.

3 Billy Graham, *Nearing Home: Life, Faith, and Finishing Well* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2011), vii.

4 Mary-Lou Weisman, "The History of Retirement, From Early Man to A.A.R.P.," *The New York Times* (March 21, 1999), www.nytimes.com/1999/03/21/jobs/the-history-of-retirement-from-early-man-to-aarp.html (accessed June 10, 2015).

5 Ibid.

6 Chris Farrell, *Unretirement: How Baby Boomers Are Changing the Way We Think About Work, Community, and the Good Life* (New York: Bloomsbury Press, 2014).

7 The quote is attributed to St. Francis of Assisi on blog.gaiam.com/quotes/authors/saint-francis-assisi (accessed June 10, 2015).



ROBERT M. NEWELL

is a minister in Georgetown, Texas.