

LOITERING (WITHOUT INTENT) AT THE CROSS ROADS

(Preparing to Retire: a Case Study. TCD 1/10/09) Tony O'Dwyer (odwyertony@eircom.net)

If you wander down a side street in any city or flourishing town in Asia, you'll find representatives of the Chinese diaspora in their "Chinese" stores. Inside the door, in the semi darkness, the granddad, perched on a high stool, shapes that hustling world into place: the staff (mainly his family), the customers, the goods and cash register. Though old, he is never retired.

In Korea, when a man reaches his sixtieth birthday, his family honors him by the *hwan gap* ceremony. He is vested in a ceremonial cloak, prayers are recited, incense burned, speeches made and potent rice wine is drunk, liberally. Having survived beyond the norm, he is deeply esteemed and valued. He is never retired.

In Japan, there is a saying: "*Old people are everyone's treasures*" and are treated as such.

In East Galway, I was brought up on a farm with my four siblings, parents and Granny. We all had our jobs and did them, Granny too. She did not retire, nor did my parents. They were our treasures, though we didn't use that word.

In Africa, where the HIV/AIDS plague is decimating the villages, the grannies keep their children, grandchildren and families alive. None of them die when they retire; they never retire.

In the Third World, ten in eleven of its even billion people have no savings on which to retire. Some work, many don't, ever. They all die, prematurely.

Statistics show⁽¹⁾ that Ireland is the safest place in the world where a woman can have her baby with the probability of her dying from complications related to pregnancy and childbirth at 1 in 48,000. Compare that wonderful statistic with the immensely sad statistic from Niger in West Africa, where 1 in 7 fifteen year old females will probably die from pregnancy and childbirth complications.

These inequalities, less extreme, but inexcusable, are mirrored in Ireland. The powerful NESF Report of January 2006⁽²⁾, stated that Ireland is one of the most unequal countries in the developed world. The richest 20% of the working-age population are earning 12 times as much as the poorest 20%; one of the highest levels of inequality among the 30 OECD countries. In terms of equality of opportunity for women Ireland is ranked 51 out of 56 countries. Nearly a quarter (23%) of our working age population lack functional literacy skills, the second highest illiteracy rate among the leading 18 industrial economies. Think of it! One in four of our population does not have the right to enroll in Trinity or other such institution. That's apartheid in my book. Think of the pleasure from reading, so many have missed.

We the retiring, surely have unfinished business in our worlds.

There is however, a critical issue that relates to our old age status. In 1970, Simone de Beauvoir⁽³⁾ wrote, what is still observable to day, in our so-called industrialized countries: "The status of the old is never won, but always granted."

That is, political and moral power is accorded by the active majority, on its terms, to us, the old and disposed of minority. We collude in our disposal when we pursue our vested interests, such as when, as pensioners, we marched against our pension cuts, convinced of our entitlement to full retirement. Having surrendered our moral standing, to our shame, we had to remain silent about the moral collapse of our leaders.

If we claim our old age status as our earned right, then we will surely be accorded significant moral authority to shape our world into place, like the Chinese Grandad. The development of such a consciousness and solidarity must however, overcome the inertia of old age, as well as our psychic 1950s colonization.

Those of you coming to 65, were born in 1944. By 1956, arriving at your 12th birthdays,

you had been enculturated into an Ireland conditioned by many poverties and oppressions. In that year 60,000 people emigrated from Ireland, more than in any year since the 1880s or since. Another eleven years would pass before the ban on the 5,000 “dangerous” books, censored in the 1950s and earlier, would be lifted, challenging us to decolonize our minds and start down the long road of thinking for ourselves.

As for me, and perhaps for you too, if I am to move on, I must first exorcise myself of those guilt inducing ghosts who can still ambush me into seeking a false security.

When it came to my retirement a few years ago, I rebelled against my uselessness in laying aside my skills. Retirement was an economic construct validating my obsolescence, changing me from producer to consumer, which, given the state of the world, was egregiously selfish.

I didn't retire. I continued to work. I had something to offer.

Then this summer, with many misgivings, I dropped out, to be confronted by the sharp issues I avoided when I deferred my retirement.

The death on the ninth green of smooth swinging George, my long time friend and classmate, brought home to me a hard statistic: I was scheduled to die in a dozen years.

Though my once deep fear of death had lost its power, given its inescapability; its unveiled imminence startled me. There was now no other project to buffer me from that final project, my death.

To retire, to set aside that relentless energy, that I so casually brought to my work, was to surrender a great pleasure of my life, even life itself. “To die, to sleep, to sleep, perchance to dream” was, with Hamlet, if not to be desired, to be accepted as a mystery and inevitable.

Yet to utter that taboo word was a liberation;
I could not continue to exult in my eros, my life force,
while denying my thanatos, my death instinct, as Freud called them.
Each would now challenge the other, even if with only one outcome.

More unexpected were the early stings of loneliness
From that congenial and worthwhile world I was so happy in.
(I was responsible for the preparation and training of Irish development
workers going to work in the developing countries in APSO, the Agency for
Personal service Overseas.)

The effervescent development workers, boundary breaking training sessions,
meetings, gossip and coffee breaks are ended.
Colleagues who were friends call me less.
I miss them, especially the special,
always good for a pint, a joke, or had read that book I newly discovered,
or told me to cop on when I should.

I took my friends too much for granted
and must re-foster them while making new ones.

Loneliness became insidious. When two friends told me
that they each demolished a half bottle of whiskey per day,
I made a rule to never drink on my own.

Instead, I must learn the language and enculturate myself into this workless
world, this country for retired men and women I have migrated to.

The withdrawal to my house was to find it empty.
My wife, Bernie, died seven years ago.
My daughters, fledged and flown,
are plunging into their lives, loves and work with wonderful abandon,
while I stand on the sidelines shouting in at them:
"Go for the line, you hairpins"
and they do with everything they have.
While I increasingly live through them, vicariously

To fill the void of Bernie's absence, I put an ad in the paper:
MEN SEEKING WOMEN and met and co-interviewed a dozen or so.

They came, lined by life but undefeated, intuitive, real and down to earth,
well dressed to honor the occasion - most of them.
One, sipping my expensive coffee,
dismissed me between her gym and hairdresser.

We exchanged our stories, mine in minutes, theirs in an hour or two,
weaving the woof and warp of their lives' tapestries:
children, spouses, grandchildren and work.

Their men were gone: a bereavement here, a separation there,
or a hidden, failed outcast of the underhanded Irish divorce.
They were lonely, some distressingly so, but lived with it.
A man?
He might entertain, even spice up a life.....

I am happy that before I retired,
I didn't plan what I would do after, as friends urged me.
Then, my work gave me many roles, identities and worlds.
But now, stripped of them, I must re-identify myself.
And as that nakedness exposes one to a special kind of aloneness,
I must summon up the courage to choose and answer the question.

I am learning the first lesson of retirement: the day of reckoning has arrived
extending far beyond my work and career, to a broad range of relationships:
with Bernie, my daughters, parents, siblings, and many others
and desist betting on God with "Pascal's wager."

My painful discovery is that there is nothing I can do
about many of these relationships,
except to utter a silent profound apology or heartfelt thanks.

But much more painful if I revisit, as I must,
moments of indecision and cowardice in my life,
when I did not take the road less traveled.
If I do not revisit those moments,
I will become a Bodach an Chota Lachtna
trailing my ever more soiled cloak behind me.
So, standing at the cross roads
I will be arrested for loitering without intent,
If I do not go right back to the beginning and ask and become

Not what I am, but what I am not. Who do I dare to be?
“To arrive at where I started
And know the place for the first time” as TS Eliot discovered.

Perhaps the gift of retirement is the challenge to be truthful to oneself.
After all, what have I to lose?

I have three options:
deny myself the status of old age and indulge myself with retirement plans,
or accept the status as granted but not won, and pursue my self interests,
or claim the status as won with a *hwan gap* type ceremony,
perched on a high stool, nudging myself and my world into place.

If I can balance the tension between my eros and thanatos,
then as it ebbs, the sweetness of living will become ever more enchanting
and I will live more intensely to give my life one last hurrah.

That way I can devoutly embrace my retirement
because it must surely be the beginning of my liberation,
but not as I would have planned it.

Now where is that ad: WOMEN SEEKING A MAN? Me!

⁽¹⁾ *Maternal mortality in 2005* Estimates developed by WHO, UNICEF, UNFPA and World Bank (c)
World Health organization 2007

⁽²⁾ *Creating a More Inclusive Labour Market*: National Economic and Social Forum Report 33 - 6/1/06

⁽³⁾ Simone de Beauvoir *The Coming of Age* (1970)