

CHAPTER 18

FACING MORTALITY IN THE RETIREMENT YEARS

This chapter on mortality is strongly influenced by three events. The first was the sudden and unexpected death of my only cousin on my father's side of the family. Howard Kent, MD, died in a traffic accident when two young males in a car crossed the median strip and hit the car driven by Howard, who was accompanied by his wife Peggy, head on. I learned of Howard's death on my 77th birthday through the kindness of his neighbor Mr. N. Thomas Sauer, who somehow found my telephone number. Peggy survived, which is fortunate since two children would have had to suffer the sudden loss of two parents. Howard was approximately eight years younger than me and was still seeing some patients, so he had not fully retired. Howard's death was particularly unsettling to me because the decision on how to spend the remainder of his life was taken from him by an irresponsible driver. Sudden death can happen to anyone, since similar head-on collisions that are the result of careless or drunken driving are all too frequent. Laws of life apply equally to all people; none are exempt—a reality that seems to elude many individuals. I feel reasonably certain that Howard had sufficient retirement funds to end his medical practice entirely and, therefore, I think he was serving some patients because of his desire to be of service to humanity, rather than to accumulate wealth. I suspect that, even had he known that his life would end shortly, this service would have continued. I have always been impressed that the famous physicist Richard Feynman (1989) made a conscious decision to serve in the now famous "O-ring" Congressional hearings on the spacecraft Challenger disaster, even though he was suffering a fatal disease. Feynman made the crucial point about the lack of resilience of the O-rings at low temperatures when he dipped one in a glass of ice water during the hearings and showed how much resilience the O-ring had lost. This demonstration was the defining moment of the hearings. Feynman could not have been absolutely confident that he would have any impact on the outcome of the hearings, but he chose to be of service anyway.

The second important event impacting my contemplation of mortality was my moving to a townhouse in Warm Hearth Village, a retirement community, in March 2000. This long-considered move occurred because my spouse Jean and I recognized our vulnerability to being isolated from the community by snow and ice storms, which might include a loss of electric power in a house that was heated and otherwise run by electricity, including the water supply. Although we signed a life lease on the townhouse, we did not own it and paid a monthly fee, which included maintenance of the dwelling itself, except for the washer and dryer, and maintenance of the grounds. Such a living arrangement meant no loss of independence but considerable reduction in responsibility. In addition, Warm Hearth Village also made available the transition to an assisted living center (me) and then to a full-scale nursing facility (Jean). Relatively few people in retirement continue their former professional activities at any level, although considerable tolerance and support can be found in a retirement community. In some cases, musicians may suffer loss of hearing, while other professionals may suffer diminished eyesight, and so on, which cruelly prevent them from continuing their former professional activities. Others, such as Wybe Kroontje (now deceased), whose vision for this retirement community (based on The Netherlands' model) was the impetus for the facility, still continued to be active in service to Warm Hearth Village and pursued other interests such as gardening. Some retirees are active in social groups, church groups, etc. Most seem to have one or more activities that are important to them and pursue them to the limit that their health permits. Jean and I initially accepted responsibility for the maintenance of a portion of the 7-mile hiking trail system, which we then used on a daily basis, weather permitting, and which we thoroughly enjoyed.

Another factor for considering retirement (and my own mortality) was a continuing series of invitations to give keynote addresses by means of electronic media (because I seldom traveled), to write chapters for books edited by others, to edit and write books, and, last but not least, to produce manuscripts for professional journals. In terms of the development of the field of environmental

studies and my remaining professional career, I felt my location geographically made little difference.

After moving to Warm Hearth Village, I decided to cease public speaking entirely (I honored already scheduled commitments) so that Jean and I could have more time together and to avoid the aggravations of travel. As if fate were determined to check the sincerity of this decision, an invitation to give a keynote address for the 2000 Olympiad of the Odyssey of the Mind at Sorbonne University arrived. The invitation was very tempting, as well as being a great honor. However, the reasons for the basic decision still seemed persuasive; I sent a letter expressing deep regrets and explained the circumstances that led to the decision. This letter became a “point of no return” because I could not justify accepting any other invitations. Predictably, an invitation came to lecture in a colleague’s class. The invitation involved no travel, but Jean’s dizzy spells had increased and their occurrence was unpredictable. A fall for her would be dangerous. The end of my professional speaking era brought no pangs of regret or feelings of frustration! Presumably, since invitations were still coming, I was pleasing a wide variety of audiences right up to the end—much better to have stopped willingly than to cease because invitations stopped!

A bright side to these decisions was that I had better control of my time. Jean and I were able to take walks on the trails of the Village, or she could nap when she was fatigued and I could write. Getting better control of my time has not diminished my communication with colleagues. I have been better able to focus on writing. The joy of producing manuscripts has remained at about the same intensity for all but the beginning of my career.

I am content with my expenditure of time each day in the retirement community. Maintenance time (health care, shopping) is obviously essential. However, quality time with family (via email and telephone) comes first, and professional activities that do not involve travel come second. Last, but far from least, social interactions (religious, cultural, and conversational) are very rewarding.

I moved Jean to the nursing facility in mid-2001, and I moved to the assisted living center. When I visited Jean, we sometimes looked at photographs from past wonderful days, and I was grateful that we were able to share so many memorable experiences for 63 years. I do not fear death, but, after living in a retirement community, I do fear various disabilities that cause a severe loss of independence.

I had realized intellectually that Jean’s death (February 21, 2005) was inevitable; the event, nevertheless, was a huge emotional shock. I was not prepared for a world without Jean—I had shut this possibility out of my mind. Sometimes denial helps when one’s lifetime companion is afflicted with an irreversible condition. I am still adjusting to my new circumstances. Friends from as far removed as Jean’s college roommate (Kathy Brady) and up to the Blacksburg community were very understanding and kind. Our children and physicians were especially helpful.

About four months after Jean’s death, I began to get seminar invitations because “I was now free to travel again.” While deciding on these requests, I had an invitation to give a talk locally. I had to drive less than five miles to present the talk, which was well attended and the questions were stimulating. It was very enjoyable, but tiring. I began wondering how I could travel to a much more distant location and be far away from my apartment where I could rest and elevate my legs periodically. I wear compression stockings (to minimize the probability of blood clots) that must be put on each morning and taken off by bedtime. Nurses perform this duty for me, but the average hotel, motel, or private dwelling lacks this type of skilled help. In addition, I can reach a substantial number of colleagues from my residence and still maintain a lifestyle that protects my health. As of August 2005, I have postponed a final decision on travel. Since I have not fully regained my balance, a walker is essential and I have not fully mastered walking on steps. The effort required for professional travel has increased markedly. Furthermore, I might not have adequate energy for any undertaking when I arrive at my destination.

However, it is worth remembering that in mid-2002 I could hardly walk and had severe pain. Although I am being cautious in the short term, I still have hopes for more travel in the long term.

Whatever happens, I can celebrate the 50+ years of my professional career that I have already experienced.

On August 2, 2005, I decided to devote all my efforts to finishing this autobiography, even though six manuscripts were ready for Darla Donald to edit. Alternating between the book and manuscripts was neither efficient nor satisfying. Even if I could travel more easily, leaving work uncompleted is disquieting. Both Darla and I have benefited from focusing on this book. I am treating the autobiography as a “work in progress” and expect to get help in filling in the gaps from those people who have shared my career.

Reference

Feynman, R. P. 1989. The cold facts. Pages 119-153 in *What do You Care What Other People Think?* W. W. Norton, New York.