

# News for Life after 55

## *How to Work with Our Free Time*

*Hello. I hope you enjoy this newsletter about having a happy retirement. It is based on the material presented in *Flow* by Dr. Csikszentmihalyi (Dr. C), *Dopamine Nation* by Dr. Anna Lembke, and *Hooked* edited by Stephanie Kaza, which contains articles on happiness and desire from leading Buddhist teachers.*

### Having a happy retirement

It is probably safe to say that we all want to have a happy retirement. Dr. C has found in his research on happiness that this doesn't just happen on its own and how we spend our free time dramatically affects the quality of our retirement life. Dr. C finds that we are not taught how to use our free time well so we often find ourselves ill equipped for the challenge and have to feel our way along in the dark. As a result, this newsletter looks at three main ways we often spend our time in search of happiness and the pros and cons of each.

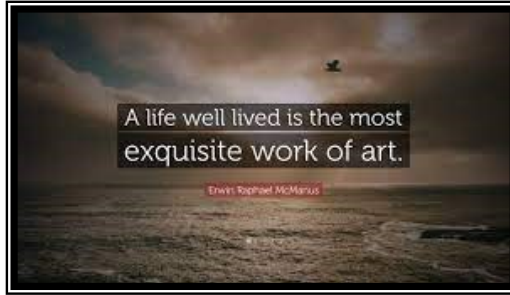
### Our 1st approach: Letting our days unfold

In the honeymoon phase of retirement, many of us just let the days unfold as we unwind from working full-time. Some of us somewhat rebelliously use our time to do whatever we want whenever we want. This approach is supported by Dr. C findings that our mainstream culture often sees work as a necessary evil and being able to relax and having nothing to do as the royal road to happiness.

This period of unwinding and rebalancing ourselves can last for several weeks to several years. But it does come to an end once we have restored ourselves. Boredom begins to show up in our days and the need for more challenge arises in our lives. If we resist, boredom weighs down heavily on our lives.

### Our 2nd approach: Seeking pleasure

Our mainstream media tells us that retirement gives us the opportunity to enjoy the good things in life. To fill our idle time and to keep our minds busy, we may seek out stimulation such as sex, eating, media consumption, shopping, texting, drinking, reading formula mystery and romance novels, and drugs. Dr. Lembke finds that our smart phones are veritable hypodermic needles delivering feel good dopamine 24/7.



Dr. C has found that some of these stimulating activities in small doses improve the quality of our lives considerably, but having more and more of them usually leads to a path of diminishing returns. For example, eating the first piece of chocolate cake is wondrous, but the second and third leads to an increasing sense of overload. Often this excessive indulgence can leave us with a feeling of listless dissatisfaction.

Dr. Lembke finds that instead of stopping we may chase after our first experience pursuing the pleasure for its own sake. She shares her story of her compulsive over-consumption of romance novels after reading *Twilight*, her perfect romance.

Dr. C urges us not to use this approach as the main way to fill our time and all authors recommend a path of moderation "to tame the I want mind" says Buddhist teacher Sunyana Graef. A second Buddhist teacher, Rita Gross, says seeking pleasure gives us the opportunity to find form and elegance with just enough (the middle way) for ourselves and the planet.

If we become addicted and caught in excess, Dr. Lembke often recommends taking a break from the activity (dopamine fasting, she calls it, with or without the help of a professional) so that our brain can rebalance itself (return to homeostasis) and take joy in simpler pleasures, then possibly begin the activity again with moderation.

I love eating quesadillas as an *hor d'oeuvre*, but if I have one every day I can't taste them any more. When I resisted the temptation to keep eating them, I discovered having one twice a week gave me the tasty treat I enjoyed without the drawback.

### Our 3rd approach: Finding meaningful challenges

Surprisingly, our mainstream culture does not teach us about or encourage us to find meaningful challenges in retirement. But this unmarked path, this *road less traveled*,

is an essential way of finding happiness in retirement. While letting our days unfold (approach 1) and in seeking pleasure (approach 2) we may have unexpectedly discovered venues of meaningful challenge like cooking a good meal, having a good conversation, gardening, camping, and going on a hike.

Why all the fuss? Meaningful challenges lead us to the experience of *flow*. It is the time when we get so involved in what we are doing that we lose track of time. We experience a sense of everything being right with the world. When it passes, we are so grateful for the excellence of that experience and we have learned and grown from it.

Imagine says Dr. C that you are skiing down a slope and your full attention is focused on the movement of your body, the position of your skis, the air whistling past your face, and the snow covered trees streaming by.

If skiing doesn't mean much to you, Dr. C encourages you to substitute your favorite activity like singing in a choir, painting a picture, dancing, programming a computer, growing grapes. What all these have in common is that we are at one with ourselves—what we feel, wish, and think are all in harmony. And the flow experience enhances our learning and provides new levels of challenge.

Because flow activities are so essential to our happiness, Dr. C encourages us to engineer our lives to have more meaningful challenges and thus flow in our days. In doing so, we discover that responding to the *call of the heart* leads to deeper joy and satisfaction than seeking pleasure dependent on external stimuli.

### Engineering more flow in our lives

To begin to create more meaningful challenges and flow in our lives, it is helpful to know that we usually spend our time on three types of activities: *maintenance*, *leisure*, and *work*.

*Maintenance activities* include all the tasks to keep our lives running such as housework, grooming, and driving.

*Leisure activities* include active activities such as doing a hobby, volunteering, writing poetry, weaving, and traveling. It also includes passive activities such as relaxing and watching TV.



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## Events & Services

**The *Crafting Your Life After 55* Workshop** — Come explore creative ways to recognize and align with your life purpose after retirement. One participant said: *A great class...one of the best I've taken.* Capitola Recreation, Saturday, Jan. 13th and 20th 10 am to 12:30 pm, 4400 Jade St., Capitola CA \$83 Resident/\$91 Non-resident. Call (831) 475-5935 to register.

### **The *Crafting Your Life After 55* Workbook Release 3.0 is Available**

With Release 3.0, the workbook now contains all the information covered in the workshop with even more exercises. It also provides guidance on cultivating flow in your life and taking healthy risks. It is an excellent self-paced workbook that you can do anywhere or anytime you wish.

\$22.95 plus \$7.01 tax and shipping, \$29.96 total

Pay using PayPal or send a check to Robin Everest

1555 Merrill St., Santa Cruz CA 95062. Please include your shipping address.

**Robin Everest** has taught *Finding Your Life's Work* workshops throughout the San Francisco bay area and now leads *Artist's Way* and *women's 62+ hiking* groups. She retired in 2018 from teaching professional writing at Santa Clara University.

*Productive activities* include work, encore careers, and studying.

Dr. C has found that flow rarely occurs with *maintenance activities* and *passive leisure activities* and advises us not to fill our former work days with these activities. He has found that if we do so, it often leads to low self-esteem, depression, and despair. (The one exception is driving, which is a main way flow arises.)

### **Fill our days with learning & growth**

Fill your days with your favorite *active leisure activities* says Dr. C. like hobbies, music, doing sports, exercising, taking a class, mentoring, writing your memoir, beekeeping, and going to restaurants. Your time becomes filled with enjoyment, learning, and self-development. Dr. C recounts that the Greek word for leisure, *scholea*, is the root from which our word *school* comes from.

Also, find a *productive endeavor of interest*, recommends Dr. C., which enables you to build as much flow as possible into your life. For example one student of mine was a potter by trade who is continuing her craft, but also taking yoga

courses to become a yoga instructor. Another was a former high school art teacher who is now spending two to three hours in her art studio three days a week. Another was a chiropractor who is now studying classical piano and singing in a choir. A fourth is a career businessman who is now transitioning into carpentry.

These are just some examples of the kind of creative readjustments that you can bring into your life. You might also think about any offshoots of what you did prior to retirement. For example, I taught professional writing and am now teaching *Crafting Your Life After 55* workshops and *Artist Way* classes.

### **Looking more closely at flow**

Flow occurs when a person's skills are fully involved in overcoming a manageable challenge. If the challenge is too high, frustration occurs. If it is too low, boredom occurs. So a person in flow is completely focused. There is no space for distracting thoughts or feelings. Time changes—hours seem to pass by in minutes. Whatever one does becomes worth doing for its own sake.

The one caveat is there are start-up costs with flow activities. In other words, you usually have to invest a certain amount of time and effort before flow occurs. For example, it may take 30 minutes of practicing the piano before flow arises.

Dr. C. notes that in successful European cultures where adults had time on their hands, elaborate cultural practices evolved to keep the mind busy and ordered including complex cycles of ceremonial rituals, dancing, competitive tournaments, and plenty of opportunities for conversation. Our culture does not automatically provide this for us (and actually misguides us), so we need to create it for ourselves.

### **All 3 approaches together**

So which approach is best? It is not an *either or* but an *and*. Find the right balance of each of these 3 approaches:

Approach 1 helps you find the natural rhythm/pace to your ideal days and weeks.

Approach 2 lets you order your mind and discover the stimulating things in *moderation* that give you pleasure.

Approach 3 lets you fully engage yourself in active leisure activities and endeavors of interest that you love. These meaningful challenges let you engage your skills, explore your potential, and experience the beauty, knowledge, and mysteries of life.

**In conclusion**, we are learning that the excellence of an individual life depends to a large extent on how our free time is used. Taken together these three approaches give us the opportunity to turn idle time into a life well-lived. They add joy and interest to our lives and give us a chance to belong to something greater than ourselves. They enable us as the baby boomer generation of 73 million strong to leave a lasting legacy and in so doing contribute collectively to our culture's well-being and advancement. So what are we waiting for? Let's go.