

Lessons in retirement: A "beginner's diary"

by [Jerry K. Robbins](#) in the [April 12, 2000](#) issue

Taking Retirement: A Beginner's Diary, by Carl H. Klaus

"Are you old?" a little boy asked as he popped up in the pool beside me. Hoping that his vision merely had been blurred by the spray and not wanting to admit my age, I tossed off his question by replying, "I didn't think my backstroke was that bad." He paddled away muttering, "You must be crazy."

Perhaps I was. At the time I was on the brink of retirement from a long career as a campus minister, and I had every reason to be happy about the future. My career was ending on a positive note. My personal finances were in order. My wife, Alice, and I were planning a trip. I had plenty of good, self-chosen work lined up to keep me busy. I had a hobby. I could look forward to the company of retired friends and to sharing relaxed lunches with my wife.

But I was not happy. Talk of my replacement made me feel unneeded and unwanted. I knew that I would miss my office and the work-day contact with other people. As my mail and phone calls slowed to a trickle, I felt isolated. My desk calendar stopped recording—and reminding me of—my accomplishments. The changes in my routine made me fidgety.

And I worried about the ominous things that happened during the two weeks before my retirement date: a driver ran into my car and totaled it; our dishwasher, garbage disposal and computer broke down; a manuscript I had submitted for publication was rejected; and my doctor, his face drawn in a frown, told me I had to come in for tests.

Obviously, I needed help. Cast upon the turbulent waters of a major life transition, what would help me keep my head above water? Retirement savvy didn't come any more naturally to me than learning how to read, write and do arithmetic had when I was a child. Then I had had to learn the three r's; now I had to learn a fourth one.

Carl Klaus's *Taking Retirement* appeared just in time to help.

Klaus is a professor of English, founder of the Iowa Institute of Writing, and author of numerous books. As I read his journal, I had the uncanny feeling that he was telling my life story as well as his own. Like him, I had worked for many years in a university setting, more than 30 of them in the same place. Like him, I had heart problems and had dealt with professional tribulations and writer's angst. Like him, I had a supportive and sensible wife, had dabbled in doing stand-up comedy and had enjoyed and developed a hobby. I identified with his retirement activities: working on his finances, vacating his office, reminiscing as he went through his files, planning a retirement trip and getting a new laptop computer. He records emotional ups and downs that mirrored my own. When he noted that retirement is worse than a heart operation because there is no bypass for it, he expressed the pain I was feeling.

I spent a great deal of time during my final days at my job worrying that I would not be able actually to retire. When I put up my sign saying "retirement" everyone seemed to read it as "available." I had a dozen invitations to undertake a variety of projects, almost all having to do with the work I thought I was leaving behind. Klaus documents a similar process and his struggle to say, "Enough!" At first he perceived these professional connections as comforting handles with which to hold on to the familiar, but soon they began to get in the way of his new interests—gardening, traveling, writing, cooking and just spending leisurely time at home.

Although I wanted to throw off all the work my job involved, I didn't want to give up the keys to my office. This familiar place comforted me. It seemed to bring order to my new life, a life which felt dangerously without anchors. My office was like a secure spaceship saving me from drifting meaninglessly into the great void of retirement.

Klaus's book assured me he had experienced the same thing, only more so. Not only the space but also the daily contacts with students, colleagues and the mail seemed critical to him. He felt rejected when his request for office space was denied. He rejoiced when he was given a place in the emeritus wing. Then, over the months, as his interest in other things developed, he realized the foolishness of his desire to hold on to the things of the past. I, too, am now getting along quite nicely without my old office, thanks to my new office at home. Reading Klaus's account of the drudgery of moving his boxes of books and files helped me through a similar

process.

Identity problems plagued my crossover into retirement. When I was working I knew who I was. My robe defined my role. I had a title: “PR” or “Pastor Robbins” or “Reverend.” When the final retirement reception came (an event to “draw the line,” says Klaus), I was shorn of those titles. People still used them, but they had become meaningless. Klaus repeatedly laments his loss of identity; he wonders, “Who am I anyway?” Although he previously had reinvented himself through three or four career modifications, he was not ready for the psychological impact of losing his title when he retired.

Retirement made me realize that my age-cohort was now old people. Since I had worked with young people all my life, I resisted being lumped with the elderly. Similarly, Klaus did not want to be “ghettoized” with the old. Still, we are old. I can well remember the first time, many years ago, when a young person called me “sir.” Klaus records that when he fell in the street and someone yelled to him, “Are you all right, sir?” the appellation hurt worse than the accident. He describes how a visit to a retirement home triggered thoughts about his own “transformation.” He laments the way that age separates the elderly from young people and even provokes hostility between the generations. He wonders if his diary is an effort to protect himself from decline and ultimate obscurity, “a self-perpetuating enterprise to the greater glory of myself.”

While Klaus is more interested in describing his experiences than in “the rage for meaning,” he offers some terse insights. About staying loose: “The spring flowers had survived the snowstorm by staying flexible, by the natural expedience of bending rather than breaking.” On finding wisdom: “Knowledge sometimes arrives in the most unlikely ways.” On fleeting fame: “A flurry of attention and then a long and quiet life.” On studious inattention: “This morning I focused on sleeping in, then on eating a leisurely breakfast while reading the newspaper without actually taking in the news.” On acceptance and trust: “Perhaps things just fall into place in retirement, as in a garden, without one’s even knowing it.” He concludes, “I’m beginning to feel as if living well were all that mattered. Not as the means to an end, but as an end in itself.” What counts finally “is getting on as decently and thoughtfully as one can.” There is grist enough in this book for grinding out a way of living as well as a way of retiring.

Klaus is very good at describing the roller coaster of feelings in retirement—one day up, the next down. He says he cherishes the time for reflection afforded by his diary exercise, but later says he wishes it were done. He writes about his hysteria, frustration, loneliness, fear and anger as he tries to come to terms with retirement, and then describes several good days spent visiting friends, eating good meals and presenting readings of his new book. He works compulsively, then goes for days without shaving or dressing till afternoon. He spends enjoyable hours planting his seeds and flats, then looks at his weather-beaten garden and laments that he is adjusting no better than his plants are.

Several retirement cards I received said something to the effect that because I had done my work so well, I could now be pardoned from work. Klaus describes this perception as one of the ironies of retirement: the reward for work is to stop working—unless we can find a way to be meaningfully active in the absence of “a regular remunerative position.” One way to do this is to keep on working—to teach a class, set up a consulting business, do supply preaching. Instead of working and getting paid, you get paid (by your retirement plan) and work. Even though I no longer have “a job that pays wages,” I carry my work habits into retirement. While these habits reassure me that I know who I am, keeping them also impedes my transition into retirement. Not wanting to be “terminated,” Klaus spends a lot of time doing much of what he has already done, refusing to relinquish his occupation, forsake his career. But he knows that his assignment is to retire.

The retirement process is not so much a swaying bridge as a twisted path. Though Klaus goes this way and that, he does move out of his initial funk. Despite vacillation, Klaus realizes that it is nice not to have to read all those student essays and run all those workshops. And it’s nice to be free to do other things. His wife, Kate, provides a needed reality check. “How many good years do you think we have left?” she asks. We know he has finally come to terms with retirement when he rejects his admitted self-pity, overcomes his resentment (the “venom of the retirement bug”), gives up his backwards glance, and embraces his new life with jubilation. In the end, he finds the “tranquillity” that he has been seeking. All this gives me hope that my own season of melancholy will give way to a time of joy.

The book offers much in which to delight, including masterful accounts of gardening, cooking and eating. Klaus’s exhaustively documented meals amount to a tantalizing gourmet notebook. The last part of the book is a wonderful account of a Canadian getaway. Klaus is also good at presenting the intricacies of retirement planning. He

struggles with the frustration of trying to figure out the complexities of his retirement plan, the vagaries of the stock market, the indifference of the Medicare system and the insecurities of Social Security.

Klaus is aware that retirement is different for different people, and that he is only giving his story. He does not address issues unique to longevity in a job or to forced retirement. He gives us only brief glimpses of the notion of vocation (a life and livelihood that are so integrated that one flows seamlessly into the other), and the impact of retirement on the spouse of the retiree (Kate complains that he is writing a “me alone” book). He says nothing about religion and little about the lurking reality of death.

Still, many people will find this book helpful. Drawing on a spectrum of retirement styles, many of which he documents through his talks with others, Klaus manages a smooth transition. Of his trip to Canada, he writes, “It’s like turning the page of a book. You turn a corner, go down a road, and it’s all behind you.” Klaus has helped me to turn a corner. Now it’s time to look ahead.