

The Vital Principle: A View on Retirement

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There is a wry language of 'retirement.'

Literally, "to be retired" should mean 'to be tired once again'. But that would make little sense. We would think to be well and deservedly tired once is enough! It can also mean to be withdrawn from whatever activity engages one, and that could make sense, or having a retiring demeanor like a wallflower at a party.

But one could be 'retired' from one particular activity, say something that puts food on the table with predicable regularity, but the time could be just as fully filled by an equally or even more satisfying pursuit such as building model airplanes, entertaining and educating grandchildren, or in community service to the needy.

How then to look at retirement?

Such are the idiosyncrasies of our culture in the modern world that only moneymaking activities count; other avocations remain hobbies or pleasures that do not make the grade as vocations. It is just like much of the work that women do in and around the home and family. Since no monetary value is attached to it, the concept of retirement from it does not exist. Patently unfair, we admit, but that's the way it is. Perhaps it is an admission of our inability to measure such work and its value in dollars and cents.

There is a difference between value and price after all! We don't want to become the kind that knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.

One of us (ASM) has been retired for a few years from an engineering position that took him across this country building or fixing nuclear installations. He is now getting a little tired of retirement, and looking for ways to keep his mind and body engaged in life.

The other (IJS) is looking forward to impending retirement from a life in academia with mixed emotions. Life was overly, tiringly, busy for decades; what will it be now in retirement?

We have not asked our respective wives, but a traditional woman then might think of her husband's retirement as "twice the husband at half the income." We prefer to think of retirement as a time when, in the words of Bob Hope, "the candles cost more than the cake." The versifier Ogden Nash (I don't know if I should label him a poet) reminds us that:

*"Senescence begins
And middle age ends*

*The day your descendents
Outnumber your friends."*

Luckily for us that point hasn't arrived quite yet.

Such meanderings, however, might lead us into landmines of conflicting notions of gender politics or the philosophic parsing of what we do and how we define ourselves. So, why don't we side step this temptation for now and leave it to our readers instead.

It seems that the greatest driving force in life is the desire to be useful and to be doing something meaningful. Is this that lies at the core of life, or do we feel thus because we have been doing this for so long that we know not what else could we possibly want or do.

"Everything one does enough of eventually generates its own interest and one then begins to believe in it." One of us had put these words (*From: Is There Intelligent Life on Earth*) by the 1960's pop guru and writer Alan Dunn on the frontispiece of his doctoral thesis. Sure enough, one of the examiners caught it, and the first question at the thesis defense was "What exactly do you mean by this." A stimulating discussion interlaced with humor ensued.

What does Sikhism tell us to do with our lives? Since most Sikhs are products of a complicated mix of Indian culture supplanted by Sikh teaching, which are often at odds with each other, it might be more rational and sensible to start by keeping in mind the context of the traditional Indian culture. Also remember that this culture stems from and reflects the Hindu world view.

The Hindu culture tells us to, while Sikh view absolutely rejects the idea to, divide life into four equal segments; say, in the hypothetical 100-year- lifespan, the first 25 years to grow up and learn a trade or skill to make a living, the next 25 to marry and nurture a family, the third quarter to slow down, enjoy the rewards of life and progressively to withdraw from worldliness, albeit gradually, and finally in the fourth quarter of life to renounce the world, walk away from the world, go the mountain top or seek the seclusion of the forest, if you have to, to find your soul — if you still have one.

This was and remains the Hindu model of a full life – not that we have seen it practiced much.

But this is decidedly not what Sikhi tells us to do. So how do we look at a full life?

First let us trace the trajectory of a lifespan as most of us experience it, and as Guru Nanak framed it in a series of compositions:

ਮ: ੧ ॥ ਪਹਿਲੈ ਪਿਆਰਿ ਲਗਾ ਬਣ ਦੁਇ ॥ ਦੂਜੈ ਮਾਇ ਬਾਪ ਕੀ ਸੁਇ ॥ ਤੀਜੈ ਭਯਾ ਭਯੀ ਬੋਬ ॥ ਚਉਥੈ
ਪਿਆਰਿ ਉਪੰਨੀ ਖੇਡ ॥ ਪੰਜਵੈ ਖਾਣ ਪੀਅਣ ਕੀ ਧਾਤੁ ॥ ਛਿਵੈ ਕਾਮੁ ਨ ਪੁਛੈ ਜਾਤਿ ॥ ਸਤਵੈ ਸੰਜਿ ਕੀਆ ਘਰ ਵਾਸੁ ॥
ਅਠਵੈ ਕ੍ਰੋਧ ਹੋਆ ਤਨ ਨਾਸੁ ॥ ਨਾਵੈ ਧਉਲੈ ਉਭੇ ਸਾਹ ॥ ਦਸਵੈ ਦਧਾ ਹੋਆ ਸੁਆਹ ॥ ਗਏ ਸਿਗੀਤ ਪੁਕਾਰੀ ਧਾਹ ॥
ਉਡਿਆ ਹੰਸੁ ਦਸਾਏ ਰਾਹ ॥ ਆਇਆ ਗਇਆ ਮੁਇਆ ਨਾਉ ॥ ਪਿਛੈ ਪਤਲ
ਸਦਿਹੁ ਕਾਵ ॥ ਨਾਨਕ ਮਨਮੁਖਿ ਅੰਧੁ ਪਿਆਰੁ ॥ ਬਾਝੁ ਗੁਰੂ ਡੁਬਾ ਸੰਸਾਰੁ ॥੨॥ {ਵਾਰ ਮਾਝ ਮਹਲਾ ੧ ਪੰਨਾ ੧੩੭}

At the beginning (the newborn) cherishes the breast for its milk. Then comes an awareness of his parents. He learns to recognize his kin. The love for the play in life including food and drink follow. Lust awakens next and is limitless. He amasses wealth and toys. In time, his body is laid waste in wrath. He goes grey and his breathing is shallow. Finally he is put to flames to return to dust. His friends lament but the soul has flown. Even his memory passes. Such is life spent in spiritual darkness (SGGS: 137).

Similar thoughts are powerfully reinforced repeatedly in the Guru Granth. We offer first a citation where our journey of life is visualized as parts of a single night in one's life. (In all

the citations that follow the translation is not an exact literal rendering but is meant to capture the gist of the idea.)

ਪਹਿਲੈ ਪਹਿਰੈ ਰੈਣਿ ਕੇ, ਵਣਜਾਰਿਆ ਮਿਤ੍ਰਾ, ਹੁਕਮਿ ਪਇਆ ਗਰਭਾਸਿ

ਹਥੋ ਹਥਿ ਨਚਾਈਐ ਪ੍ਰਾਣੀ ਮਾਤ ਕਹੈ ਸੁਤੁ ਮੇਰਾ

ਤੀਜੈ ਪਹਰੈ ਰੈਣਿ ਕੈ ਵਣਜਾਰਿਆ ਮਿਤ੍ਰਾ ਧਨ ਜੋਬਨ ਸਿਉ ਚਿਤੁ

ਕਹੁ ਨਾਨਕ ਪ੍ਰਾਣੀ ਚਉਥੈ ਪਹਰੈ ਲਾਵੀ ਲੁਣਿਆ ਖੇਤੁ

(SGGS: 75)

In essence it tells us that the first phase of life is prenatal and neonatal; the second is the period of growing up; the third phase speaks of the needs of youth and fixed largely on lust and material success; in the fourth and final phase the grim reaper appears imminent to deliver one to the mystery of death.

And again:

ਮ: ੧ ॥ ਦਸ ਬਾਲਤਣਿ, ਬੀਸ ਰਵਣਿ, ਤੀਸਾ ਕਾ ਸੁੰਦਰੁ ਕਹਾਵੈ ॥ ਚਾਲੀਸੀ ਪੁਰੁ ਹੋਇ, ਪਚਾਸੀ ਪਗੁ ਖਿਸੈ,

ਸਠੀ ਕੇ ਬੋਢੇਪਾ ਆਵੈ ॥ ਸਤਰਿ ਕਾ ਮਤਿ ਹੀਣੁ, ਅਸੀਹਾਂ ਕਾ ਵਿਉਹਾਰੁ ਨ ਪਾਵੈ ॥ ਨਵੈ ਕਾ ਸਿਹਜਾਸਣੀ,

ਮੂਲਿ ਨ ਜਾਣੈ ਅਪ ਬਲੁ ॥ ਢੰਢੋਲਿਮੁ ਢੂਢਿਮੁ ਡਿਠੁ ਮੈਂ, ਨਾਨਕ ਜਗੁ ਧੂਏ ਕਾ ਧਵਲਹਰੁ ॥੩॥ { ਵਾਰ ਮਾਝ ਮਹਲਾ ੧ ਪੰਨਾ ੧੩੮ }

At 10 one is a child, at 20 a youth, at 30 handsome. At 40 he has really come of age (matured), at 50 he is on a downward slope, and at 60 impending old age finds him. At 70 his mind is failing, and at 80 all abilities have dimmed. At ninety he lies helpless and powerless. The world is a mansion of smoke.

Much as there is an upward trajectory to early life, there is a downward slide to the latter half of it. Retirement is thus not a day, an hour or when one gets a gold watch, even as time and timeliness lose their relevance. Retirement is a process. It reflects the entropy that is the law that defines and governs all stable systems. The best of stable systems were stable once and gradually diminish in stability while they decay.

Guru Granth Sahib (1427) speaks of three stages to a life: childhood, youth and old age (ਬਾਲ ਜੁਆਨੀ ਅਰੁ ਬਿਰਧਿ ਫੁਨਿ ਤੀਨਿ ਅਵਸਥਾ ਜਾਨਿ), and that whatever is born must perish (ਜੋ ਉਪਜਿਓ ਸੋ ਬਿਨਸਿ ਹੈ ਪਰੋ ਆਜੁ ਕੈ ਕਾਲਿ).

So, Sikhi does not suggest that we wait to do good until a time when the mind or the body are unwilling or unable. The time to do good is now and always, as long as the mind-body connection is able to. Sikhi exhorts us to do good in this world (ਵਿਚਿ ਦੁਨੀਆ ਸੇਵ ਕਮਾਈਐ ॥ ਤਾ ਦਰਗਹ ਬੈਸਣੁ ਪਾਈਐ, SGGS: 26).

If the goal of life is to nurture the divinity that is in all of us (ਮਨ ਤੂੰ ਜੋਤਿ ਸਰੂਪੁ ਹੈ ਆਪਣਾ ਮੂਲੁ ਪਛਾਣੁ, Guru Granth, Page 441) then one need not, indeed must not, wait until retirement from life to start on the path. The time to try and discover the universality and ultimate reality that is in all is not when we retire but now. It is a habit to be cultivated over a lifetime.

Surely, there is a joy to doing nothing, but it is strictly transitory though it is not without purpose. It is like leaving the land fallow for a season so that it can be ready for reseeded and replanting. Similarly, for the mind and body. Retirement is not for the rest of one's life,

not even for a quarter of it. (And no one knows when, for anyone, that last quarter starts or ends.)

Clearly, a time comes when our day in the sun is truly done and the baton must pass to another generation. This a law that can never be overturned, only obeyed elegantly with grace. And that is what we Sikhs call “Hukum.”

Whether at work or play, we inherit a world with a host of gifts and variety of flaws. This is what the generations past have willed to us. The only way to repay the debt is to leave the world a little bit better, perhaps with fewer or different shortcomings than we inherited.

Retirement then becomes an active phase albeit with a shifted focus. Therein lies immortality.

To be able to answer the question posed by Guru Amar Das, “ਏ ਸਰੀਰਾ ਮੇਰਿਆ, ਇਸੁ ਜਗ ਮਹਿ ਆਇ ਕੈ, ਕਿਆ ਤੁਧੁ ਕਰਮ ਕਮਾਇਆ (SGGS: 922); in other words, what footprints will you leave in the sands of time.

That, to us, is life eternal.

