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PERSONAL HEALTH

In Act 2 of Life, Doing Work That Matters

By [JANE E. BRODY](#)

Dr. Peter I. Pressman decided to retire in 2003 after 40 years as a New York [breast cancer](#) surgeon much admired by his patients for the time and skill he devoted to them and their families.

He was 68, and a combination of factors told him it was time to call it quits. He found some changes in surgery to be less rewarding, he had a desire to travel more with his wife and office partner, Peggy, and he wanted more time to pursue cultural interests.

“I loved work and I never coveted spending a lot of time on the golf course, but I looked forward to not having to get up at 5:30 every morning and being able to read the newspaper before nightfall,” Dr. Pressman, now 72, said in an interview.

“I was obsessed at first about whether I’d have enough to do, but I soon discovered I didn’t get enough done. I needed more structure in my life. I also missed the ongoing relationships with my patients and the intellectual and social stimulation from interacting with colleagues.”

With Dr. Yashar Hirshaut, he had written “Breast Cancer: The Complete Guide” in 1993, a book that got him interested in nonsurgical aspects of the disease. He worked on another revision of the book that was published in 2004.

And when [Weill Cornell Medical Center](#) asked him to develop and direct a genetic risk assessment program to help women affected by genes that raise their risk of breast and [ovarian cancer](#), Dr. Pressman accepted gladly.

“My professional goal had always focused on bettering the lives of women, and this is something meaningful that enables me to continue to help women and remain involved professionally,” he said.

“I’m in the clinic two days a week and see every patient personally,” he continued. “With this commitment, I find I structure my time better and get to do a lot more. I make lists of the things I want to do and find the time to do them.”

A Meaningful Encore

Dr. Pressman is a classic example of a retiree who reinvented himself. Marc Freedman, the founder of Civic Ventures, an institution seeking to capitalize on the experience of baby boomers in solving the world’s problems, calls it “Encore: Finding Work That Matters in the Second Half of Life.”

That is the title of his 2007 book that challenges complacency about retirement (published by PublicAffairs), and the fundamental idea behind [encore.org](#), an online network for people who want to use their experience to create meaningful “encore careers.”

In the book, Mr. Freedman emphasizes the logistical and financial fallacies inherent in an “endless retirement,

30 years of R & R,” and the individual and societal need for older people to continue to work, but in ways different from their earlier years.

In 1935, when Social Security was established for Americans 65 and older, the average life expectancy was 61. Today, Mr. Freedman points out, many baby boomers “can expect to live 30 or more years beyond traditional retirement age.”

As 70 million baby boomers approach 65, the country is facing both an impoverished Social Security system and empty retirement accounts among millions of older people.

In place of the hand-wringing and doomsday predictions, Mr. Freedman suggests creating new approaches and opportunities for 60-somethings, especially in the public and nonprofit sectors.

Like members of the Experience Corps (created by Mr. Freedman) who help children succeed in school, these people might work part time as volunteers, with their expenses paid, to fulfill important community needs.

Finding a Good Fit

Encore career possibilities are endless. They can be lucrative and personally fulfilling. In their book, “Don’t Retire, Rewire!” (Alpha, 2007), Jeri Sedlar and Rick Miners provide a step-by-step guide to help people approaching the second half of life discover their passions and purpose.

Noting that many people “flunk retirement,” they list many reasons for retirees to “rewire,” among them a need for mental stimulation and a desire to remain productive, do something meaningful and make a difference for others.

This husband-and-wife team recognizes that for some people, personal reasons predominate, like wanting to do long-postponed activities, find a better balance between work and play and continue to make money while doing something they love.

The authors put future retirees through their paces. They list and describe 30 possible reasons that people want to work, to help them identify their most important goals and find a good rewiring fit. They also discuss what people may lose when they retire, like involvement with others, the energy of the workplace and a feeling of importance.

Sometimes the best fit is to continue doing your life’s work but on a less demanding schedule. For example, I retired officially from The New York Times 10 years ago, after 32 years as a full-time science writer

I have, however, continued to do the work I love most — writing this weekly column as a contract writer and speaking to lay and professional audiences about fostering good health.

The reduced workload enables me to spend much valued time with my four grandsons and good friends, as well as enjoy more cultural events, travel, physical activities and hobbies like gardening, knitting and crocheting.

A New Model

But in reading the books mentioned above, I realize that I am still missing something — the personal (as opposed to financial) giveback to social causes that I might support, like helping parents and schools turn out healthier children and helping young people achieve a wholesome work-life balance.

Ms. Sedlar and Mr. Miners quote Norma Collier, a 62-year-old marketing manager who wants to make a difference: “Before I die I want to do something to make the world a better place, and this is the time to do it — not when I’m really old and decrepit, but when I’m still active.”

As these authors put it: “Rewiring is different from retirement because it starts from inside you. Rewiring is not about responding to someone else’s goals for you or living out society’s agenda for you. Rewiring comes from you, your personal motivators, your vision, your dreams, your goals and your values. That’s why rewiring is so satisfying for so many people.”

According to Mr. Freedman, the time is now to put in place a new model of retirement, both for the sake of individuals and for the society in which we all live.

Those who are pioneering this new model, he says, “are not celebrating their freedom from work, but rather their freedom to work, in ways that hold the promise of personal fulfillment, economic benefit and social renewal.”

By 2050, he points out, the average 65-year-old will live to age 90. Dr. Pressman has found his niche. What will you be doing with all those years?

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