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# The Fear of Flying: Reflections on Retirement

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## Abstract

This essay is a reflection of my career, the people who helped shape my career, the changes I have experienced in the field of adult education, the anxiety associated with change, and challenge of reinventing one's self-image upon retirement.

*Keywords:* sociology, philosophy, adult education

“I have accepted fear as part of life – specifically the fear of change... I have gone ahead despite the pounding in the heart that says: turn back....”  
Erica Jung

After a long career as an adult educator, I reflect back on a few major events and many minor ones which determined my path. The truth is, most all will sooner or later face the end of their career and transition to retirement. Moving from a long, robust and stable career can be a fear-laden transition, looked upon as an either an opportunity to explore and create new adventures or a time to dread, full of anxiety, not knowing what tomorrow will bring (Hayslip et al., 1997; Jayson, 2017). This paper is auto ethnographic, in part, as it is based on my career path to retirement. It is also theorizing not just from the academic literature on lifelong learning and retirement (Findsen & Formosa, 2011) but the popular literature on retirement and how this creates learning opportunities. Thus, it utilizes simple Google searches into websites such as the American Association for Retired People (AARP). The research questions I explore are how have I defined adult education through my actions and decisions, how has adult education defined who I am, how has adult education changed during my career, and how I might define myself after leaving academe?

I argue that we construct our personal identity through work and family (Baker, 2016), and people see us through our titles and accomplishments. Jayson (2017) notes that “experts see three emotional fear factors: the loss of professional status that's closely bound to self-image, change and concern over how to spend extra time” (p. 1). I argue that each person's identity is socially constructed through family, friends and work (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). I started life as the son of a farmer's daughter and a college educated geologist. As such, I always thought my path would be in the sciences, most likely a geologist. After graduation with my bachelor's degree I worked as a geologist for private companies searching for base metals in Wyoming. Here I became conditioned to go to work every day, follow certain protocol, and work within teams. This lasted four years when I transitioned to teaching applied geology and down-hole drilling techniques at Casper Community College. My students were working adults (for example: roughnecks, doodlebuggers, pipefitters) from the oil fields—this was my first step into adult education and some of my most fulfilling years as a teacher. Maybe naively, I did not consider that some of my students had only a fifth or sixth grade reading level, and as such had the same expectations for all regardless of their educational preparation or past experiences. What I learned is that regardless of their preparation students respond well to being treated as experts who have something to share when given the opportunity. One of my fondest memories

occurred when the head librarian called after an audit and informed me that my students used the library more than any other student group. My teaching style was pretty simple: In every class each student was asked to write a research report on anything they wanted as long as it was somewhat related to the course content. The lesson is: Everyone is capable of conducting research on a topic of interest that excites their curiosity.

Not knowing the art of teaching or writing curriculum, I began a master's degree at the University of Wyoming as a distance student driving once a week, 150 miles each way, from Casper to Laramie. Many core courses on pedagogy and curriculum were not very valuable or interesting as they did not connect with my classroom experience teaching working-class adults, but I did find the history and philosophy courses very stimulating. This is when I met Michael Day, who was innovative and open minded, and was introduced to the academic field of adult education. Other important events included taking a course from Mort Gordon, a visiting professor who retired from the University of Michigan, and attended my first AERC conference where I met Myles Horton and others adult educators. Slowly I began to see myself as an educator, rather than a geologist. My master's thesis was on the liberation theologian Gustavo Gutierrez, and focused on a spiritual social movement. It was during my thesis defense that one committee member accused me of being a communist, at which point Michael came to my defense and shut this committee person down.

Another experience during these early years that shaped who I was becoming was my involvement in the Wyoming Nuclear Weapons Freeze Coalition, including serving two years as the co-chair of this statewide organization. Though Wyoming is politically conservative, the coalition included people from all walks of life, religions, and political persuasions. We argued that placing MX missiles in our state, after every other state had refused them, was not economically or environmentally in the best interests of our citizens. Though I had explored the state for uranium deposits and was (and still am) an advocate for clean nuclear energy, I made the distinction between weapons of mass destruction which kill indiscriminately and energy that limits carbon emissions that pollute the atmosphere. I also learned that people across the political, socioeconomic spectrum can come together and have their voices heard over a common issue.

These years in Wyoming represent my first rebirth, and where I learned that lifelong learning has phases, each of which are connected by the bridges and bonds we develop with others, as well as set behaviors that we carry from one phase to the next, developed through the scaffolding of life experiences. With each phase, through the social capital that we accumulate, we develop and construct new identities on top of past identities that have been developed, maintained, or discarded (Davis, 2014). Though my identity was still evolving, I began to feel confident in who I was and the decisions I was making.

With a growing family and three young children, I started exploring the next steps of my career, one which was not merely a personal goal but also of responsibility. Not knowing what direction to go next, Michael Day suggested I call Budd Hall and John Ohliger, which I did. After a short introduction, I shared a short history of who I was, what I was doing, and what I might do next. Independently they both suggested I go to Northern Illinois University and study with Phyllis Cunningham—I found this curious that they both had the same response as I had never heard of this university and this professor. Yet, I contacted Phyllis and she encouraged me to apply and said if I came there they would find money to support me. A few months later I went out for a visit and met Phyllis, Tom Heaney and Aimee Horton, and I was totally blown away by the reception I received and immediately knew that this is where I wanted to be. The

position they had waiting for me was as a program coordinator at the Lindeman Center in downtown Chicago. I started the transition from the security of being a geologist, something I knew I was good at, to being a community development person, a skillset I wasn't sure I had. I was also moving from a rural setting where everyone knows your name to a large, fast-paced, urban city with congestion, many cultures and ethnicities, social class differences, neighborhood differences, all juxtaposed in a patchwork quilt that was overwhelming as well as beautiful. Not only did I see how I was different than my neighbors but I began to relish these differences and spent hours listening to the life stories of strangers who soon became friends. Moving my family to Chicago presented new challenges I never anticipated, and required me to open my mind to new ways of thinking.

The beauty of this new position was the community created by Phyllis, Tom and Aimee, students who soon became friends, and other faculty who also welcomed me to their program. As a doctoral student, Phyllis encouraged me to take classes outside of the College of Education and study with the best professors the university had to offer—in the end I took more classes outside the department than in. And today I often think that requiring too many courses for a doctoral degree is limiting and stifling as each student is unique and therefore needs a tailored program of study to maximize their potential—yes, this is a poke at CPAE standards. This triad of professors allowed me to explore and blossom by not pushing me into a box that said this is what an adult educator is and is not. My work with the Lindeman Center included working on resident management in Chicago Public Housing, with minority owned businesses in Rockford, assisting a few small rural communities in economic development, and with union workers at the Belvidere Chrysler Plant, only to mention a few projects.

With support from Phyllis, Tom and Aimee, I also became involved with the St Francis Catholic Worker House in Uptown under the guidance of Fr. Bob Bossey, SCJ, whose mission was to serve and live with the homeless as well as work for social justice on nuclear arms, struggles of the poor, and exploitation of the masses and most vulnerable in the name of capitalism. I also recognized that I had privileges, one of which is that I had the cultural capital to leave the chaos of the city whenever I wanted to or needed to. One might argue that though I was working for social change I was not a victim, maybe just a “liberal do-gooder.” This experience profoundly shaped who I am today, and fit perfectly with what I was learning at NIU.

At NIU I developed a network among other students whom I still rely on today. My classmates included Fred Scheid, Ian Baptiste, Vanessa Sheared, Derick Mulenga, John Holst, Gabriele Strohschen, and many others. As well as Mechthild Hart, who was introduced to me by Phyllis, and whose writings on women's work still resonates with me. The other person who was important to my development during these years was John Ohliger, a close friend of Phyllis's who introduced me to Ivan Illich, and maybe is one of the best bibliographers the field of adult education has known. All of these people believed in and worked toward social change, and helped shaped my understanding of adult education's potential. And, these people became good friends, who I learned from and owe a lot of my success too. My dissertation was on the collaboration between the United Packinghouse Workers of America and Highlander Folk School, which offered me the opportunity to interview Myles Horton several times before he passed, Vicki Starr, Robert Blakley and others who were involved in workers' education.

After I earned my doctorate, I struggled to figure out my next step. After interviewing at several universities for faculty positions, I decided that I was first and foremost a community person and academe didn't seem as interesting. I accepted a position as an area specialist in community and organizational development with Iowa State University Extension. I often joke

that this is where I (metaphorically) earned my second doctorate. The state was divided into nine areas and my area had a third of the state's population. Extension to Communities was structured as a theory to practice organization that included nine area specialists and approximately fifteen faculty from sociology, political science, economics, landscape architecture, and civil engineering. We also worked with agricultural, family and youth faculty when the project needed their expertise. Our mission was to work with rural and urban communities on revitalization projects. The university dedicated a vast amount of resources to our team, without cost to the communities. It was exciting to be part of this team, to experiment with new ideas and approaches to community development, without the pressure of being a lone wolf, knowing that my skills were appreciated as well as knowing there were others equally skilled whom I could partner with. I learned from and worked with some of the nation's renowned experts in their field, including Jan Flora, Steve Padgett, Norm Riggs, Lois Wright Morton, and Ken Stone, names not known to most adult educators. During this time, we invited John Gaventa to conduct a workshop on participatory research, an empowerment approach we wanted to use. It was an exciting time but after ten years I started looking for a new challenge.

Fortunately, I landed a tenure-track position at K-State as a member in adult education and leadership program. Once again I had to reinvent myself, learn a new culture, and face some unanticipated challenges—the first years were rough as I wondered what I had gotten myself into. After my first faculty meeting my department chair, David Thompson who guided me through the bureaucratic maze of higher education for the first sixteen years, asked what I thought of the meeting. My response was that it was crazy how different faculty fought over minor issues. Though he agreed, he then warned me to be careful as these “crazies” would soon vote on my tenure and promotion, and I soon discovered the subtle and discomfiting importance of this sage advice. Whereas at NIU and ISU I appreciated and was energized working in a team, initially at K-State, the idea of a team was missing. I can't count how many times someone would come by my office to complain, or gossip about someone else, hoping to get me to join their side. At one point one of my colleagues stormed into my office and stated angrily, *I know you are close friends with Phyllis and part of the NIU cabal*—I had no idea what this was about and just sat there speechless. I began strategizing for success.

Slowly I sought opportunities to develop colleagues I could collaborate with and form a team. I benefitted from the wisdom of David, Frank Spikes, and Charles Oakley in our department. David helped me to reach out beyond our faculty and meet new people. I joined the Center for Engagement and Community Development, as well as the Institute for Civic Discourse. I found collaborators in the Statistics Department, as well as other departments in the College, most notably Mary Devin and Theresa Miller. I kept an open door policy, and a positive attitude. Soon people would stop by asking about my research interests, and share what they were doing. Once I made it through the first turbulent years, I enjoyed going to work, focusing on my projects, and socializing with others, and developing new friends. Shortly after I was hired, Royce Ann Collins was hired into a tenure-track position, and become a strong colleague and teammate. One of the more rewarding projects funded by the Kansas Board of Regents was three-year academy to develop leadership skills within the state's adult literacy community. Another was serving as lead editor of the *Adult Education Quarterly* with a dynamic team Cathy Hansman, Leona English, Qi Sun and Ashley Gleiman. In this role I gained an appreciation for the wide breadth of adult education research, especially international research from developing countries. Most of all I loved working with graduate students on their research, guiding many

through the dissertation process, and getting to know them as co-researchers and friends. Life was good.

Over the last four years the culture changed, partially due to COVID 19 and partially due to expanding technology. Whereas when I first arrived at K-State everyone came to their office most days—it was a busy place. Today, on my floor with about thirty offices maybe only two or three faculty come to office on a daily basis. The building is like a ghost town—it's downright lonely and the sense of esprit de corps has dissipated. To make matters worse, the university changed its budgeting model to Responsibility Centered Management, which emphasizes rewards and penalties based on enrollment numbers where there are winners and losers. Not only does this encourage advising students to take only courses in your department or program, and not venture outside seeking the best professors as Phyllis advised me thirty plus years ago, each faculty member has to subscribe to academic capitalism and recruit students (Zacharakis, Tolar & Collins, 2013). At first this didn't burden me as I had developed networks throughout the state with community colleges and adult learning centers, but coupled with the vacant offices and dark hallways, I was not having as much fun as I did before. Yes, I still enjoyed working with faculty and graduate students, but Zoom conferences create an invisible wall which inhibits developing close relationships and dynamic synergy. I started thinking I was "old school" and it was time for me to retire from academe and seek new adventures. As a Coloradoan, where I was raised—the mountains and wilderness are bred into my soul—and where most of my family lives today, it was time to sell my home in Manhattan and move permanently back home.

In 2022 I signed my retirement papers and will officially become professor emeritus on June 1, 2023. What will I do? How will I reinvent myself? What do I want to do when I grow up? I love to fish, hunt and hike. I love riding and tinkering with motorcycles. Also I love playing with grandchildren, and hanging out with my children and family. Yet, retiring seems to be more than this, it is an opportunity to take on new challenges and possibly give back to my community. And, for the first time in my life there are no financial worries. One thing I have learned is that I am social, and enjoy the company of others and meeting new people.

A quick search on the internet indicates that the foremost worry of most retirees is financial—fortunately, I am financially secure and satisfied living within my means. Money is only one stressor; Jayson (2017) writes that the three primary emotional fears are loss of status, change, and not knowing what to do with extra time. Loss of status is closely tied to self-image—I am known to many as a professor of adult education, but this is not how my family and friends see me. I have built a career working in colleges and universities but this is not what I see myself doing in this next phase. A second concern is loneliness. In an interview (Saner, 2023), Robert Waldinger, director of Harvard's Study of Adult Development, points to the 84-year study on adult happiness that close relationships can result in better health, reduce coronary artery disease, and longer life expectancy. Though economic and food security are important to happiness, more does not lead to greater happiness once security is achieved. Projects like Men's Sheds (Carragher, Golding & Foley, 2022), active involvement with family, friends, religious groups, community centers, and clubs lead to greater social connectedness where one is valued for their contributions. Isolation, according to Waldinger, is as lethal as smoking. Developing these social connections give meaning to our lives, and become more important once we retire and lose our professional identities.

In this essay I have mapped my professional career, highlighting how through many experiences with the help of colleagues and friends I became an adult educator. But my identity has never been that of a professor; rather I see myself as a community educator who has worked

to make a difference everyday people lives, who really don't care about my degrees or titles. This being said, I admit to exploiting these relationships I have had with universities to expand capacity within these communities that often have limited access to the university. What I have most enjoyed are the relationships that have been developed throughout my career. I have been defined as an adult educator but have also been intentional in how I see myself in this field. The bigger research question is how has the field changed throughout my forty-year career. As the field has matured and the forces of professionalism have grown stronger, it seems that institutional learning that occurs in universities and industry is overshadowing community and social change education. At K-State we have built our curriculum around CPAE standards, which is quite limiting and negates the potential of utilizing all the learning opportunities a university can provide. Adult education in universities has become more individualized, technical and rational, and less utopian foregoing critical reflection and the common good. This change is not unique to adult education as liberal education in general is under attack where students, more often than not, seek a graduate degree to better their socioeconomic condition—I understand this and have been a part of this transition occurring with our field. The foundation of my career is based on the lessons I learned from the many people who mentored and worked with me early in my career, that of social change, community education and liberal education. Of course my perspective is limited and probably is not shared by all.

As I begin this new chapter, and leave the university, my fear of flying is more than not knowing what tomorrow will bring, it is also letting go of my academic identity and status as a professor within the university. I will always be an adult educator, but it will look and feel different. Honestly, I am excited about seeking out something new, the opportunity to redefine myself, and about not knowing what tomorrow will bring. This transition, I know, will be easier because of the friends and networks I have built throughout my life. The first challenge, though, is mental: You cannot fly unless you are willing to leave terra firma.

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