Retirement

By Thomas R. Cuba, retired

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Retirement. It's a funny thing, this retirement business. Ever since I was old enough to start thinking about what kind of a career I might have, I have also been offered advice about retirement. Those early thoughts about a career began with television shows such as Sea Hunt and Rawhide. Would I be a cowboy? Perhaps SCUBA diving was in my future. Perry Mason, the books and the television series, also played a role. Of course, I would be the detective, Paul Drake, not the attorney. But I must admit that, later on in high school, I considered life as an attorney.

I also pondered professional photography, and, odd as it may seem, life as an author. At the time, I imagined that someday I might be a poet.

For a brief period, while I was sixteen, I even toyed around with the idea of the priesthood. I think the seed for that was planted by my Aunt Patsy who once told me that I would either be the Pope or the greatest con man that ever lived.

Sea Hunt had the effect of drawing me to the water, and, with luck, under it. Then I read Two Years Before the Mast (Dana) and I was stuck. Later on, in high school, was told that I actually had to make a choice of careers so that I could go to college. And, of course, I was told that I had to consider whether or not my choice would lead to a comfortable expenditure of my golden years.

Most of the chatter among my peers was about careers as doctors or lawyers. On my personal list, I also included physicist, mathematician, rancher, and veterinarian. Combining physics, mathematics, and retirement, I decided on mechanical engineering as a degree, but still hadn't picked a career. Still, my advisors were all happy that I had selected a course of study that would lead to a pleasant twilight.

Halfway through my first semester of college, I changed my major to Zoology: Not only were there no retirement prospects, it was doubtful that I would even be able to get a job. Then someone invented the EPA and suddenly careers were abundant.

After graduating from college, I joined the Navy. It was a good choice for me, but not as a career. After six years, as I considered relinquishing my commission and the Navy retirement package, I was once again cautioned about having prepared for my later years. The badgering in my youth had not been lost on me, and, while I was in the service, I consulted a financial advisor. He told me to save $10,000 a year and I would be set for life. The problem was that my pay as an Ensign was only $7,700 a year. I thanked him politely and went on with my life.

When I left the Navy, I pursued, and captured, a doctorate in ecology, specifically successional ecology. What followed was a career (finally!) practicing the art of soothsaying, for applied ecology is a quaint mixture of science, imagination, and guesswork. Being a mechanical engineer would have been a lot easier. Thirty years later, my joints became arthritic and it was time to close the shop and retire. What would I do? Was I ready to retire? Reflecting on my career, I found that I had: written thousands

of reports and papers, become certified as a SCUBA instructor, taken tens of thousands of nature photographs, and conducted thousands of analyses in both the mathematical sense and with respect to how physics drives an ecosystem. I'd even done some legal work representing my clients as a consultant. It seemed, in hindsight, that I'd had almost all of my possible careers at once.

For fifty years or so retirement itself had been painted as a quiet time: a time to be spent fishing, playing golf, or traveling. That was not to be.

The physical act of retirement took about a week. I closed the office and carried everything home to my garage. All the scientific equipment, the boats, the SCUBA gear, and the library came home. Then I held a huge garage sale. What I didn't sell, I donated to the local college. So far, so good.

After the dust settled, I still had that library: thousands of papers, reference materials, reprints of papers by others, scientific journals, and textbooks. The volume of this material, on shelves, in boxes, and in file cabinets, filled a 15x20 foot bedroom. It was too much. I had to get rid of some of it. I donated some to the local marine lab and still had too much.

Scientific journals, hundreds of issues, were not wanted by anyone. The papers were all on line. Textbooks and references were not wanted. Researchers in the modern world didn't look things up. They googled. And then there were all those reports I'd written. What use for them could I have in retirement? I brought the big trash bin around and began filling it up (yes, mom, it went to recycling). As I tossed journal upon journal, paper after paper, and report after report into the bin, I came to grips with my emotions. It was at that moment that I fully understood retirement. I wasn't retiring. I was throwing my life away. I'd spent that life, as an ecologist, doing my best to make a difference: to add to our understanding of nature, especially as it related to pressures put upon it by mankind. And I was throwing it all away. My life had become a cosmic turd.

That is what retirement meant to me.

Fortunately, I had those careers within my career and have taken up writing stories, essays, and a little poetry. I take very good photographs and now include models in my work. Once my hip is replaced, I expect to go SCUBA diving and hiking once again. I expect that someday I will need to throw these things away as well, but there is hope. I found it when I was teaching a class as an adjunct at the local college.

A student asked me what set mankind apart from the animals, using the intelligence of dogs, baboons, and dolphins as proof that we are not so special after all. I then asked him how an animal such as those he mentioned learns. Of course the answer was, "from others in the group."

"And how does mankind learn?" I asked.

He gave no answer.

I conceded his points of intelligence and of learning from others and offered the human parallel. Thousands of years ago, knowledge was passed from one generation to the next through story telling. It was often a one-on-one proposition.

I also conceded the point that dolphins and monkeys and dogs, and many others, can have their version of a conversation. They have a language, albeit with a small vocabulary.

What makes mankind different is that unlike animals which can only communicate in close proximity to each other (certain whales excluded), people can read and write. I can write something and someone on the other side of the planet can read it; we can communicate from afar. But, better still, mankind can communicate not only over long distances, but through time. I can read Plato, Socrates, Dana, and Madison and their ideas take up residence in my head. For that is the aim of all education: to take what is in one person's head and put it into that of another. With proper written instructions, and enough time, I can build a model airplane or an actual rocket ship.

And so, whether or not what I write in essays or stories is ever read during my lifetime, I will never have to throw it away.