

My Struggle with “Used to Be”

By Calvin L Weisberger, MD

I just became a grandparent. My granddaughter will be six or seven when I retire. By the time she reaches an age old enough to wonder what her grandfather did for a living; the answer will be ‘used to be a Doctor.’ True enough I’ll still have the honorium, but I may well no longer be practicing or serving a useful function in medicine. Only since her birth has this conundrum appeared in my consciousness.

Since 1970 I’ve carried the MD degree and functioned as ‘Doctor.’ In 2010, the ‘used to be’ will kick in. I find I’m rather conflicted over ‘used to being.’ I suspect that’s a significant part of the reason my fingers are tapping out this piece. I could say to my granddaughter, ‘I’m a writer.’ I have a passable talent with a camera also. I could tell her ‘I’m a photographer.’ I don’t have to retire from either of those until forced by health. If I can keep writing this type of piece, I may be able to claim, ‘I’m a philosopher.’

I suppose my reason for frustration is some inner need to be useful. The concept of ‘used to be’ implies no longer useful. I don’t see retirement as going from but as going to other opportunities. Certainly many of my colleagues continue to work beyond retirement. Some say they need the money. Some say they enjoy practice so much that they don’t want to leave it. The coming shortage of cardiologists may mean opportunity for me to not ‘used to be’ beyond age 65. On the other hand there is an inevitable point where there will be no choice involved.

On considering this inevitable time, I find a personal need to have something ongoing to ‘be.’ Many years ago, I served on a committee that investigated the problems caused by physicians retiring without anything to retire to. I learned from that and have worked to establish alternate activities for myself. I would like to evolve alternate identity separate from ‘Doctor.’

When I consider what I could carry on with maximum flexibility, writing seems to be natural. If I write in the

appropriate genre, my photographic interests can also be utilized. If I maintain my ability to think and imagine; a virtual infinite variety of things to write about exists. I could write serious pieces. I would love to write humor. I study each movie and stage show that I see to learn from them. I could write about and photograph places and things where my wife and I travel. If I learn about videography, I can combine writing with video—additional worlds would be open to explore.

I’ve always enjoyed teaching. I had a teaching appointment at a local medical school. I suppose that could be reactivated if I’m not considered too ‘used to be.’ I might even consider teaching a course in the life of the physician. Certainly as I look the future in the face, the question of what might have been done better in the past always intrudes upon my consciousness and conscience.

Teaching medical students and housestaff about life lessons separate from direct medical lessons might be a useful effort. It might even benefit those who sit back, listen and reflect. I could present them ideas relative to their own physical and mental health. I could point out ways of reducing the stress in their lives while trying not to cause undue stress for others. I could point out the evanescence of what we do. They could learn to take themselves and their work seriously but not to delude themselves with self-importance. They might possibly pay attention if they realize that I have gone down the pathway that they will tread and have learned some of the lessons firsthand.

I believe that, for me, it is necessary to have a plan to cope with “Used to be.” I need to choose some course(s) of action and prepare. “Used to be” is always with us, until our *existence* becomes “used to be.” We will all inevitably become part of the past. I just don’t believe that while alive we should choose to live in the past. I will continue to find things to be while I am. I’ll let others judge my “used to be” when that time comes. ❖

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