



José Florencio F. Lapeña, Jr., MA, MD

Senior Health Advisor, Ayala Healthcare Holdings, Inc.
Director and Trustee, Healthway Philippines Inc.

Reflections on Retirement: The Sunset Can be Spooktacular!

Where are we headed, oh, where have we gone?
We've come a long way, now, let us move on.
Dreams are for dreaming, wake up and they run,
Life is for living, come, let us move on.¹

¹JF Lapena, Moving on

Retirement (n.); from French *retirement* (1570's); *retire* + *ment*.
Retire (v.) 1530s, of armies, "to retreat, draw back," also, of persons,
"to withdraw" to some place, especially for the sake of privacy; from
French *retirer* – from *re-* "back" + *tirer* "to draw" and *-ment*; common
suffix of Latin origin; came to be used as a formative in nouns of
action in Vulgar Latin and Old French. The sense of "leave one's
business or occupation" is by 1660s.²

²Online Etymology Dictionary

<https://www.etymonline.com/word/retirement>

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To retire; to be retired, whether voluntary or mandatory, implies drawing back from contact with others: customary contact in the case of one's business or occupation, marked by day in, day out actions and interactions that span years and decades. Used in the context of one's business or occupation, retirement is usually associated with the sunset years of life – in the Philippine government service, mandatory retirement is set at age 65. How does one bid farewell to over half of one's life? How does one let go of familiar spaces and comfort zones?

Sunsets can be splendid and spectacular, as well as soothing. They crown the passing day with a magnificent display of colors splashing across a celestial canvas, and gently give way to a restful evening of blanketing darkness. This transition is soothing, because the respite holds promise of another day, a new dawn. In this context, to retire at night is restful, as it replenishes and renews one for the coming day. I have had numerous such sunsets in my life. They capped productive days, and promised sunrises to herald more meaningful days. Looking back, these days blend into a blur of teaching and training, research, reviewing and editing, surgeries and service.

Correspondence: Prof. Dr. José Florencio F. Lapeña, Jr.
Ayala Healthcare Holdings, Inc.
3F Makati Stock Exchange
6767 Ayala Avenue, Makati City 1226
Philippines
Mobile : +63 917 913 7258
Email : lapeña.jff@achealth.com.ph

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My primary occupation was that of teaching and training younger colleagues in the art and science of medicine and surgery, rekindling the spark that inspired them to become healers: *“treat the whole patient, not the hole in the patient,”* and *“treat every patient as though they were your father or mother, brother or sister, grandfather or grandmother, uncle or aunt, husband or wife, son or daughter,”* remembering that *“we are not doing them a favor by obtaining their histories, examining them, or participating in their care; they are doing us a favor by allowing us to learn how to be physicians and surgeons at their expense.”*

In a similar vein, mentoring authors taking their first steps in research and publication, and editing and reviewing seemingly endless manuscripts in need of revision and further revisions, often entailed countless hours of concentration, burning the midnight oil in solitude.

But more important than the formal teaching and training were the relationships that were established over the years. It was a privilege and pleasure to just hang out and get to know each other outside the classroom or hospital over food and drink, and to engage in social activities together. For better or for worse, the impact of life upon life far outweighed the impact of words upon work. Indeed, many of our mentees continue to call my wife and myself *“nanay”* (mother) and *“tatay”* (father), and have become our godchildren in marriage. Our mentees forever hold a special place in our hearts.

The years saw many other individuals and their families, mostly from the poorest of the poor, benefit from subspecialty surgeries and treatments that they otherwise would not have been able to access. I treasured each heartfelt *“Salamat, Dok!”* from patient or family member alike, and can still feel the tearful embraces of many – whether their loved ones lived or died. More valuable than any professional fee were their expressions of thanks that included (over the years): a *“bayong”* (woven-leaf bag) with a live rooster inside (that my children subsequently had for a pet in our carport before it was stolen); a claypot full of *sinaing na tulingan* (steamed native fish) made for me by a farmer I had operated on; a hand embroidered tapestry a cancer patient made while recovering from surgery and a *palay* (rice husk) mosaic from another patient’s artist son that now adorns my clinic; and a live kid (baby goat) on a leash that was walked into our surgical ward (that I asked the family to take back with them to *Carranglan*, Nueva Ecija, as I had no place to keep it – I subsequently embarrassed myself and the family on a future visit to the area, when I asked about the goat – which of course had been eaten by then). My most treasured reward was seeing patients gain a new lease on life – perhaps best exemplified

by young six-year-old Pio whose father still sends me regular video updates showing him singing *Country Roads*, chatting incessantly, clowning around and growing up like a normal boy. He and his mother underwent an EXIT (*ex utero intrapartum*) procedure under our care late one evening, and we excised an obstructing tongue cancer and reconstructed his tongue early the next morning, wondering if he would ever be able to swallow and speak.

Unlike my patients, my trainees saw another side of me. As a surgeon, I was both mentor and tormentor, respected and probably feared, particularly because of my meticulous attention to detail. I required trainees to study the possible complications and not just the contemplated surgeries, encouraging them to *“learn from the mistakes of others without repeating them”* because *“it takes five years to learn when to operate, and twenty years to learn when not to,”* I demanded perfection no less from others than I demanded it of myself.

Minutes into days, turn(ed) into months turn(ed) into years, they hurry(ied) by me.³ Teaching and training, research, reviewing and editing, surgeries and service; a large part of my life was spent pursuing these endeavors over many years. Where have the years gone?

Looking back, I did all these endeavors while bearing my personal crosses. Beset by various health problems, I was in chronic pain for as long as I can remember – or rather, I could hardly remember what it was like to be without pain. Avoiding analgesics and anticonvulsants as much as possible, my impatience and short-temperedness were evident even to myself (no blind spot there), even as I tried my best to *“grin and bear it”* with the image of the wounded healer⁴ as my guiding light. Ultimately, it was my operating despite the pain that did me in, putting an abrupt end to my days in the operating theatre.

While the sunset can be splendid and spectacular, it can also be scary, even spooky, especially when one knows there may be no sunrise to follow. When the sunset marks the evening of our lives, it heralds the moment of our lives *“when the day is through,”* and *“when the night is due.”*⁵ And instead of looking forward, one inevitably looks back, to reminisce and reflect. But to re-tire, as a good friend reminds us, can also mean *“to change tires”*⁶ and learn something new, rediscover unexplored interests, and engage in alternative pursuits. Realizing that I can do what I want, when I want, where I want (and not do what I don’t want to) provided an indescribable sense of freedom, but simultaneously led to ennui and abulia. What was I to do? My friends were pursuing their (not inexpensive) bucket lists, including



summitting Mount Apo, walking the Camino de Santiago, vintage car restoration, collecting ancient maps, coins and fossils, cultivating crops and gardening, cooking, and watching endless movies on Netflix, Prime Video, Max, Apple TV, Paramount, Disney and Peacock. Me? I could always catch up on sleep, blissful sleep.

What was I to do? At one of my lowest points (of depression related to my impending retirement), I was very fortunate that another long-time friend and former classmate was instrumental in opening doors for me to serve anew through AC Health and the Healthway Medical Network. Indeed, I am very happy to have found a new family that resonates well with me, as I really believe that Ayala truly aims “for the greater good.” I can see myself growing with a corporation that means what it says, and practices what it preaches, without merely paying lip service to corporate social responsibility. In addition, I hope to continue voluntary teaching and training, research, reviewing, editing (including our beloved *Philipp J Otolaryngol Head Neck Surg*), and service in a downscaled manner, as I devote more time to family and friends. I especially look forward to catching up on precious lost time with my daughters and grandchildren, as they sacrificed the most in being deprived of my presence. I will never forget the look of rejection on my eldest daughter’s face when, as a child, I shoved her away as she ran towards me for a hug – because I was dirty from overnight duty and afraid of contaminating her. As another dear friend put it five years ago on her retirement from formal corporate life: “If we are lucky, our future will be half as long as our past... And we need to make the most of every minute that is given us—to savor life, to cherish our loves, to dance and sing when we feel like it, to squeeze every joy that we can out of the opportunities afforded us.”⁷ And so, you Spooktacular Sunset, with courage and spirit, and good cheer, I say, *Ánimo!*

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