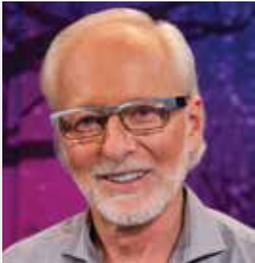


REPACKING FOR RETIREMENT:

How to Lighten Your Load for the Good Life



BY RICHARD LEIDER

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To withdraw, to go away, to retreat—these are the kinds of words many of us think of when we think of retirement. But retirement is changing, and more retirees are realizing that withdrawal and retreat aren't the way to a satisfying, meaningful life. People are searching for something more, something to give their lives purpose.

That's why it's time to repack retirement.

Why Repack?

It was an ultimate adventure to a realm far away and deep within. I was leading a walking safari in Tanzania along the edge of the great Serengeti Plains. Looking like a walking advertisement for Patagonia, I was delighted when my new friend Thaddeus Ole Koyie, a Maasai village elder, expressed a fascination with seeing the contents of my impressive backpack. Proudly, I commenced to lay out all of my high tech essentials. After several minutes of just gazing at everything, Koyie asked with great intensity, "Does all this make you happy?"

With that simple question, Koyie captured the essence of the questions that weigh so heavily on many of us. *What am I carrying? What will make me happy in the next phase of the journey? What is the good life to me?*

Both the implications and the importance of the question were immediately apparent. In a split second, his question had gotten me to think about all I was carrying and why—not just on that trek, but through my entire life. If you're feeling stuck, weighed down and overwhelmed, it may be time to take a long, hard look at your retirement.

I have interviewed hundreds of retirees and retirees-to-be and have studied the changing retirement landscape for four decades. Most of the successful retirees I have met have shared that the most important part of a quality retirement is having a purpose—a reason to get up each and every morning. Money is critical. Health is critical. And, so is meaning. Meaning matters in retirement.

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What will make us happy in the retirement phase of our lives? Personally, I admit that while some of my “stuff” did make me happy, quite a lot of it did not. The insights gleaned from Koyie’s question ultimately inspired me to repack my bags.

Lightening Our Load

It takes courage to look at what we’re carrying—and even more to consider leaving some behind. It’s much easier to just live with what we have, secretly longing for a new map and a new itinerary.

Repacking is more than a simplification strategy; it addresses the core questions for happiness. It also helps us cope with both positive and negative *trigger events* that we will inevitably encounter, whatever our age or circumstances. We may be dashing around finding all sorts of solutions and answers, but are we asking ourselves the truly important questions? Quite simply, we must, first, unpack our bags.

Unpacking simply means taking a long, hard look at what we’re carrying and why. Seeing if our possessions, relationships, passions, and purpose are still helping us move forward, or if they are weighing us down. Unfortunately, a lot of times it takes a crisis (mid-life or otherwise) to inspire us to do this sort of deeper unpacking. Repacking, however, invites us to reflect on our choices, and in the process, reveal the life we most want to be living.

For the financially prepared, this is an exciting time with many choices. Sometimes the purposeful retirement involves working full time—but at something completely different. It might mean volunteering, teaching, mentoring, getting into politics, or going back to school—for fulfillment.

Retirement is no longer an event. It’s a transition. There is no best retirement. There’s only what’s best for you.

What is the Good Life?

The *good life* is a choice to live in the *place* we belong, with the *people* we love, doing the *right work*, on *purpose*.

The old model of “the good life” in retirement has been decaying for years, driven by the new realities of human longevity, the deep-seated desire to make a difference, and, more recently, financial pressures to make our money last over a longer lifespan.¹ Emerging now is a highly personalized vision of the good life in later life—a vision dictated by a desire to remain engaged.

Repacking offers keys to help us pinpoint just exactly what the good life would look and feel like for us, how far we are from living it, what we’ll need in our bag for retirement, and how to determine the best route to get there.

10 Keys for Lightening Your Load in Retirement

After all of my interviews and studies, if I were to pick the top 10 keys to prepare for retirement and to live it purposefully, my list would look like this.

1. Review your time.

The good life comes from fulfilling time—not filling time.

When starting out in retirement, try not to put unnecessary pressure on yourself. Don’t feel guilty, at first, if you find you have nothing to do. Try to accept that the time you enjoy wasting is not wasted at all. Allow yourself to settle into your new life. Savor the moment.

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The time will come when you might want to explore more meaningful activities to fill your day. But you'll be happier if you avoid jumping into something that you'd really rather not be doing—just to be busy.

The first step to repacking is committing ourselves to a new relationship with time. Without a daily practice of time ownership, autopilot is in charge. The excuses don't fly when we own our own time. Don't become a hostage to e-mail and mobile phone checking. Take back more time for life priorities by cutting back social media time. Don't fill free moments with rote busyness and mindless connectivity.

Unpack your calendar. Review how you're spending your most valuable currency—your time. Are you satisfied with how you're spending your time? When was the last time you went to sleep at night saying, "this was a well-spent day?" Are you consistently saying "no" to the less important things in your life and "yes" to your real priorities?

2. Resist "rustout."

Burnout is overdoing; Rustout is underbeing.

A subtle killer stalks retirement. It creeps up on its victims and overtakes them, exhausting their energy and crippling their spirit. It is more prevalent than heart disease, cancer, or strokes. Yet, few people even know its name. It's called "rustout."

Rustout is the slow death that follows when we stop making the choices that keep life alive. It's the feeling of numbness that comes from always taking the safe way, not seeking new challenges, continually surrendering to the petty pace of day-to-day routine.

Rustout means we are no longer growing, but at best are simply maintaining. It implies that we have traded the sensation of life for not trying new things. Trying new things is too dangerous to consider.

What's more dangerous is not taking risks. Not making choices that keep us engaged and alive. Rustout is a disease of the heart. It's a heart killer. And we know that when our heart dies, we die.

3. Reclaim your purpose.

Retirees need a reason to get out of bed every day.

For some people this may mean taking care of a grandchild one afternoon a week. For others, it could mean volunteering a few hours per week. Others may want a part-time job they find to be low stress and highly enjoyable.

When we're giving our gifts in support of something we truly care about, we feel more energetic, more committed, and more enthusiastic about everything we do. Have you named your purpose? If not, what can you do to reclaim it?

We're led to believe that the big choices we make will determine a purposeful life. But it's actually the *purpose moments*, the small daily choices, that add up to a sense of having fully lived. How we name and claim our purpose—our reason for getting up every single day—determines whether we look back later on the richness of our life with contentment or with regret.

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4. Repack your stuff.

Take time to reflect on what's really important to you.

Most of us, in our lives, accumulate “stuff.” We keep adding things and responsibilities until we get to a point where we can't (or don't want to) carry it anymore. So, what's the solution? There are two parts to it. First, decide how much you're really willing to carry. And second, decide what goes and what stays.

Scores of people have told me how they immediately went to their closets and dressers and began digging through and separating out stuff they no longer felt they needed. I've heard stories from folks who have emptied our shelves—and even rooms—that they'd avoided dealing with for years.

The literal lightening of the load is a kind of catharsis for many of us. Sorting through the stuff is a strategy for jump-starting the deeper process of unpacking and repacking our lives for the good life.

So, try it. Unpack just one closet or dresser before deciding to go on an unabashed unpacking binge. Where will you start? When?

5. Re-elect your retirement sounding board.

Most of us can trace our successes to pivotal support from other people.

What are the important relationships that have sustained you along the way? Who are the people in your life that you've relied on for counsel and inspiration? Think of them as your own personal board of directors. Picture yourself at a retirement board meeting with these people. You're all around the table. As you sit there, what questions would you like to bring before the board? How would you like them to react and what kind of support are you looking for? They all have only one thing in common—an interest in your well being!

Step outside your comfort zone. To repack, you'll need to outwit the forces of procrastination. Go with the action, not the analysis, or inertia will win. Appoint a retirement sounding board to hold you accountable for action, to overcome alibis and cold feet. Use your retirement sounding board to shake things up by trying something new. Because you can have a more fulfilling retirement if you're willing to test yourself and broaden your horizons.

6. Re-sharpen your curiosity.

Exploration fuels vitality

If the rate at which you're learning is not equal to or greater than the rate of change today, you'll soon be obsolete. Just like a successful company, you need to engage in serious research and development activity. Research new opportunities. What are you curious about learning? How can you sharpen your growth edge?

Follow your curiosity. Locate your passions by boosting your curiosity skills. The key to curiosity is exploration. Identify an interest or an experience you'd like to know more about. What intrigues you? Why? Prepare a list of three questions that can satisfy your curiosity about that pursuit. Now research it. You can use the web and talk to your sounding board. What really grabs your interest? Choose one small step forward you will take within the next month to explore your curiosities.

Make lifelong learning a reality to keep your brain sharp and your conversations worthy of attention.

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7. Repack your relationship bags.

The No. 1 cause of relationship problems is suppressed communication.²

Retirement is a time to build new relationships and take care of those that are most important, starting with your partner. While the divorce rate is declining overall, it has doubled for people past the age of 50.

Many of us, even in our deepest, most personal relationships, figuratively have a bag by the door, partially packed. Consider the primary relationships in your life. Are you and your loved ones having courageous conversations? How can you fully unpack with your loved ones and open the door for deeper, more *courageous communication*? Start early discussions with your partner and work the retirement transition as a team.

Your brain neurons don't want comfort; they want to discover and engage. You can facilitate that by trying new things, together, through the practice of searching out *novelty*—new places, new restaurants, new friends, new activities of any kind. Shared novelty spurs intimacy. What three novel experiences could you risk taking with your partner that might add juice to your lives? Pick one small step for each novelty to try next month.

Healthy social connections, including friends with shared interests, are good for your health and critical to a good retirement.

8. Re-envision your concept of the good life.

Ask yourself, "Am I living in the place I love, with the people I love, doing the right work on purpose?"

The self-fulfilling prophecy is the surest of all—if you can dream it, you can do it. Beware of waking up sometime in the future and finding out that you've been living someone else's vision of the good life. Look forward. Dream a little. How do you *declare victory*? What does a successful retirement—the good life—really look like to you?

Financial freedom is about having enough income and free time to do the things that matter most to you. It's less about material things and more about personal experiences.

9. Reflect on purpose.

Are you "always going somewhere, never being anywhere?"

Retirees often spend the first months of freedom from work traveling, seeing grandkids, and generally enjoying an unstructured life. Then the reality of a long retirement sets in. This is when retirees start to look for a purpose. They are at a point where they want to give back.

Have you succumbed to the "hurry sickness" so common in today's society? If your brain is always filled with the noise and chatter of modern living then you're exhibiting the symptoms. If your heart and mind feel numb, then you know you've got it. The antidote: daily time-outs.

Appointments with yourself. Even five minutes a day can work wonders. Have you found a regular time and place to be alone, to put yourself on your own daily calendar? Everything starts with time. It's one of the oldest and wisest truths of time management—you have to take time to make time.

Carve out five minutes for a daily time-out, today. Take three deep breaths. Ask yourself, "Why do I get out of bed in the morning?"

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10. Rid yourself of regrets.

*The average person smiles twenty times a day.*³

Does that seem like a lot or a little to you? Are you having fun yet? Are you experiencing real joy? Fun and joy are different. Fun is an outer expression, joy is an inner glow. Joy is derived from a harmony among place, love, passions, and purpose. Are you feeling more or less joy in your life than you did last year at this time? Why or why not?

Try this. Do something "uncool." Don't let what's cool cramp your style. Retirement is not a popularity contest. Unpack by being uncool today. Do something that is out of fashion, unhip, not sanctioned by your family or usual social circle. Check out friends' reactions. How does that feel?

Liberating? Notice how dominant the coolness factor is in running your life. Being cool is opposite of the creative authenticity that your core craves.

The clock is ticking and no one knows how many tomorrows we'll have. Today is the right day to try things and to finally do what you've been meaning to do.

Have no regrets. There's a Yiddish proverb that says: "A person is not old until their regrets take the place of their dreams."⁴ It's worth remembering.

Unpack. Repack. Repeat.

Once common and easily defined, the good life in retirement is now highly individualized and increasingly difficult to achieve because of increased longevity and a changing financial landscape. But if you "repack for retirement," it's still possible to retire in style.

Learning to pack and repack our bags is a central lesson of our time. But it is a lesson we all can learn by living passionately for today and purposefully for tomorrow, and in doing so, lighten our load to live the good life.

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¹ Ben Hanowell, Slate.com, "Life Expectancy Is, Overall, Increasing," December 22, 2016

² Casey Lewis, "The Number One Relationship Problem, According to Therapists," September 2, 2016

³ Affinity4US, "The Subconscious Power of a Smile," June 7, 2016

⁴ Catherine Pulsifer, Inspirational Words of Wisdom, "Yiddish Proverbs," April 17, 2017

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