

Empty Nest

Spring is here, which means graduation time, among other things. My youngest daughter is about to graduate from college and will be home briefly for the summer before joining her older sister in Boston for graduate school. This will officially make my wife and me “empty nesters.”

The term “empty nest” evokes emotions of loss and longing for the past. Although I cannot deny that we look back fondly, if not selectively, at the memories of their childhoods, I am equally looking forward to this next phase of life, both professionally and personally. In this context, the challenges of maintaining a work-life balance are still present, but the stakes are different.

With fewer outside obligations, there is a temptation to take on new and greater positions at work. I cannot deny that it is exciting to consider alternative careers, but is that really what I need at this point in life? I have had to ask myself that question more than once, whenever I contemplate a new position. But when I reflect on what it is that truly brings me satisfaction in my life, it always comes back to personal interactions.

During the pandemic, life slowed down and our world seemed to shrink. With little travel and more work from home, I found myself relishing my clinical time and the people I still worked with in person. Now that society has reopened, I still value those people who helped me get through the pandemic and maintain a positive outlook. But how can we extend those relationships beyond the confines of the workday?

I recently attended a retirement party for Dr William Berry. Bill had joined our genitourinary oncology group from a private practice that Duke acquired and had graciously assimilated into our research and practice. He ended up staying on longer than either of us anticipated, and we grew a mutual respect. When he retired, we held several internal recognition events in his honor. Then, a couple of months after his last day with us, I was invited to another retirement party for him, but I saw a different side of Bill.

Half an hour away, on a small private farm, a diverse group of people gathered to recognize him. There were family members, people from his church, friends from all stages of his life, several colleagues from his former practice, and even some patients. All were there to recognize different facets of Bill’s life. Some saw him as a physician and oncologist, and many patients gave heartfelt testimonies of how he saved their lives. But others told stories

of their fishing adventures (overblown, I suspect) and golf games; paid tribute to him as a father, son, brother, and colleague; and recapped his role in the church.

As I watched this celebration, I began to think about my own retirement someday. Would I be recognizable on so many different levels, like Bill?

It is time for me to start planning for this next phase of life. My wife and I have noticed how some friends are reaching out to us again, asking us to dinner or on trips. These are many of the same friends whose children grew up with ours, and with whom we share many fond parental memories. But now the conversations have evolved and focus on us, our next phase of life, and what we are looking forward to in this new chapter, like adult adventures, taking up new hobbies or reviving old ones, dinner clubs, socializing, and even retirement. These are the conversations we have now, and in this context, I am realizing something else: I genuinely enjoy my friends and my life outside of work.

Now that our nest is empty, it is time to start filling it back up again, with the people I admire, enjoy, and love. That starts with my wife, who has been a steadfast support for me since we first met. But I will also include more of our friends and family with whom I have had longstanding relationships. Friendship is my recipe for personal growth and happiness. Although I will still feel tremendous satisfaction from the work I do, I hope that as my physical and mental faculties diminish, I can begin to wind down and subtly shift my emphasis to relationships outside of work and to those who know me as someone other than Dr George.

It is strange to think of myself as something other than a physician, and honestly, most of my friends see me in that light too. But there is something very liberating about being able to take all the responsibilities that we carry, especially in oncology, and put them aside. For any patients who read this, please do not worry, I am not leaving anytime soon. But I can now see a time when I will wind down my career, knowing that I will get by with a little help from my friends.

Sincerely,



Daniel J. George, MD

