

Just Pretending?

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“How have you been handling retirement?” the newly-retired husband of a cousin asked at a recent family get together in California.

“By pretending to work!” my 72-year brother replied without missing a beat. Currently, he is creating minutely-detailed spread sheets demonstrating his progress in teaching himself Russian. His office bookshelf displays books on other languages he hopes to learn or improve upon. I remember seeing French, Spanish, Turkish, and Japanese. He’ll break off to go to medical appointments, walk the dogs, eat, and watch the news or a movie. But the rest of his time is devoted to spread sheets, starting as early as 5 a.m. and often working as late as 9 or 10 p.m.

We all chuckled at his idea of occupying his time by pretending to work, but I thought again. I’m often up at 5 a.m. responding to emails that have come in since the last time I looked, sometimes from committee colleagues who’ve sent them off at midnight. I’m usually not at my computer late at night unless I’m working on footnotes for the genealogical research articles I write for several American journals. Unlike the *Driftwood*, which pays me a small stipend for this column, genealogical journals don’t pay. I volunteer the hundreds hours I put into researching, writing, and editing them.

And then there are the island organizations for which I volunteer my time. I’m on two boards, I chair two or three committees, sing in the United Church Choir, and lead sing-alongs for the residents of Greenwoods once weekly. Some of this is sheer fun, but a lot of it seems like real work to me. I feel a responsibility to get it done.

And it’s not as if I’m the only one!

The Lions Club Directory lists 157 island associations, clubs, churches, groups, and societies. In addition, a variety of commissions and committees advise BC Ferries, the CRD director, and the Islands Trust. Volunteers also serve on various water boards, the board that oversees Fire-Rescue, the Greenwoods Foundation, and an array of strata councils. Most will have a board or an executive committee and a variety of subcommittees to get their work done. Often, a nominations committee struggles to find people to carry on. Sometimes, they resort to pleas in the *Driftwood* for new volunteers to step forward.

I haven’t done a survey of the average age of all the volunteers, but the ones I happen to know are mostly grey beards.

Don’t get me wrong! I think it’s great that we senior energizer bunnies seem to keep right on hopping, but I don’t think we can do it forever.

Whenever I wonder about my own future, I try to remember what my mother was doing at my age. She formally retired from teaching at a California community college at age 70, but from then on she seemed busier than ever—organizing and teaching courses for Elder Hostel, leading tours to Europe and Latin America, and running workshops and field trips for the Oregon and California Trail Association (OCTA). By the time she was 80, she was the California Director of OCTA. By her own reckoning, she was “a busy bee.”

But by the time she was 83, she’d slowed down. On my annual visit I noticed that her email inbox was full of unopened mail. Near the top of the list one subject line caught my eye: “Joanne, are you getting my emails?”

On impulse, I opened it. The writer was the OCTA president and was wondering how things were coming along with whatever she was supposed to be doing for their next conference. It turned out he’d been wondering for several weeks.

“Mom,” I asked. “Why aren’t you opening your emails?”

“Because they want me to do work and I don’t want to do it,” she replied.

I helped her compose a letter of resignation. She wasn’t happy about giving up her title, but greatly relieved to stop organizing conferences.

I started this column two years ago after having recently learned some startling statistics. It turns out that in 2011, 25 percent of all people living on Salt Spring Island were over the age of 65 and another 20 percent were age 55 to 65. By 2021 and assuming no major changes in the breakdowns, about 45 percent of the island population will be 65 or more.

Perhaps that means more grey-haired volunteers than ever. But what if they, like my mother, decide to keep working until they’re 70? Or even 75, like the bank representative who helped me last month in California? After revealing she was born the same year as I, she evidently needed to explain why she was still working. “I like to eat,” she announced. I didn’t get the feeling she was pretending.