



### **Retirement Would Be A Cinch If I Didn't Have To Stop Working**

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It's easy to believe that once we retire we'll be much happier without the constant wear and tear of work on our aging minds and bodies. Sounds logical doesn't it? But in many cases the opposite is true—work can help us stay physically and cognitively fit, and a busy work life can obscure the ability for difficult self-examination. By stitching together the experiences of many former patients I hope to narrate how to manage some of these issues that can sometimes blindside retirees.

Here's the story:

Joe had what I will call a caboose mentality. No, this isn't a clinical diagnosis, but it pretty accurately describes people who accept that the movements of their lives are directed by the pushes and pulls of others. The movements of Joe's life were first directed by his parents and then by bosses and also by his wife, Rita. As a building superintendent for decades, Joe was a dutiful and conscientious servant and enjoyed his long, productive days. On the weekends, Rita delegated tasks to Joe and when the tasks were completed, she encouraged him to play a round of golf, which he appreciatively took her up on when prodded.

Five years prior to his eventual retirement, an economic downturn resulted in cuts in the building management's service budget, which in turn resulted in the downsizing of Joe's maintenance staff. His workload swelled beyond what he could reasonably handle, his tenants became impatient and frustrated, and his employer was rather insensitive. Joe became stressed out, suffered from angina pains, felt devalued and feared being fired as if it would have been a catastrophic event (though at that point they would have been financially secure on Rita's salary).

Joe could not separate how he felt about himself from how his manager and residents unfairly and unreasonably blamed him for their frustrations and disappointments. Now, Joe came home and blamed Rita for his frustrations and disappointments at work. Joe, "the caboose," could ill

afford to alienate his wife whom he depended on to structure and organize his life outside of work and on whom he would depend even more if he retired.

Finally, Rita put her foot down and said it was time to retire and Joe gave his management company one month's notice. During this period of transition Rita helped Joe paint an appealing picture of retirement. Anything, as Rita pointed out, would be heaven compared to the living hell that had become Joe's existence at work. Joe could not and would not argue with Rita's vision of his retirement. He longed to garden, do volunteer work, play more golf and travel. Still Joe was nagged by an amorphous apprehension about the future. Something inside of him knew that he was ill equipped to handle retirement.

Joe entered treatment feeling run ragged, like a rag doll in a wind tunnel, and could not sit long enough to think about what was going on inside of him. Worse yet, he felt guilty taking the time to think about what would serve his needs. Without space and the ability to observe himself, he was at the mercy of an inner life that shaped a static reality and dictated his every movement. Joe was in essence running from a self that felt as helpless, frightened and overwhelmed as a child who in a crowded department loses track of his mother.

Joe was pained by and understandably anxious in retirement feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities for a self he regarded as rather useless, worthless and out of his control. The beginning of his golden years became a seamless continuation of the end of his working years. Instead of his boss and his clients running him ragged, now Joe took on their identities and was doing it to himself in the form of an interminable "things to do" list that he compiled on the fly.

Having been a caboose all his life, Joe was confused as to where his parents, boss and wife ended and Joe began.

By reconstructing history through the lens of Joe's observed recollections—like a super slow motion video recorder—we created the space needed to reveal new perspectives on his history. For example, Joe realized that his mother's controlling parenting had been driven by inner forces she did not understand. Without conscious awareness of her motivations, Joe's mother didn't realize that she treated Joe as she wished her mother had treated her. Instead of correcting to the middle, she had been an infantilizing mother who was no better suited for Joe's needs than a mother like her own who rushed her out of the nest. As long as Joe did not claim authority over his own life, Joe's mother would not be forced to reclaim her desires projected onto Joe and

perhaps, finally face her own forestalled grief. When Joe married Rita, Joe's mother was still vying now along with Rita for who was best equipped to tell Joe how to run his life.

As Joe's story unfolded we learned that Joe's father was equally instrumental in writing this narrative of the boy who became a caboose. Joe's father had been a traditional provider, treating his son's needs and dreams as he treated his own: as if they did not exist. Joe's father often yelled and Joe recalled feeling very guilty, worthless and frightened in the wake of his father's temporary loss of regard for him. Worse yet, Joe was confused because his mother, who never scolded him, was silent when his father yelled at him. She too related to her husband like a caboose to his locomotive. Now Joe felt worthless to both parents.

In therapy, Joe learned to recognize and neutralize his automatic tendencies to blur the boundaries between past and present and become confused over who Joe was as a child and who he was capable of being as an adult. When Joe became stuck in a time tunnel of unconscious recollections he would confuse Rita or myself with his recollected mother and father. To help Joe free himself from these obsolete and paralyzing identifications, Joe and I worked together on meditative techniques and self-talk strategies. These tools returned him to and anchored him in the present moment, and neutralized the impact of his emotional time warps that wracked him with self-doubts rather than trusting and valuing himself to direct his life. Testing the realities of these archaic, obsolete, self-limiting, and self-defeating mindsets became easier for Joe. He began to use his retirement in satisfying and meaningful ways. The better Joe treated himself, the more deserving he felt of such treatment. His new self-confidence, fueled by a self-image consistent with his actions, created a self-fulfilling prophecy of wellbeing.