



## RETIREMENT ACTIVITY

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*by Jim Ozinga*

During the decade preceding my retirement in 2000, I was often asked what I was going to do when I retired. The tone of the question was nearly always with a prolonged ending on the final word. “What are you going to dooooooo?” Work so occupied our minds then that its absence was almost unthinkable. I tried to answer the question, but it was just as difficult for me to think about a non-working environment.

Actually, in the 1990s I was beginning not to have any choice in the matter. No, not so much my age, but my field of expertise began to disintegrate. When I came to Oakland in 1967 I brought with me a course on Soviet (Russian) politics and communism, and I soon added a two semester class called Western Political Thought—a title giving me license to stick my intellectual nose into anything happening between 600bce and the present whether that event were historical, philosophical, or religious. The Western Political Thought thing continued so did Area Studies, but the topics of Soviet politics and communism disappeared with the breakup of the USSR. As the 1990s evolved, the handwriting on the wall became quite clear. It was time to leave while the department still wished to give me a bon voyage party.

One thing I did was to work half time for three years while my wife was deciding to retire from Crittenden Hospital, and, during my half years off, I discovered some neat things about not working. Awakening in the morning and wondering what

to do that day, for example, or suddenly realizing that I didn't know what day it was because every day felt like Saturday.

So, as the time for full retirement approached I was ready in ways most people don't experience. I was a greybeard, true, but I had no real field of study anymore and I enjoyed waking up to a less certain world. Did I miss standing in front of a class and knowing a lot more than my students? Didn't teaching define me? I thought I'd miss it, but I didn't. Not at all.

So I retired. Things changed, of course. Travel, for instance. When working, my travels were work related. My wife and I traveled to Brezhnev's Soviet Union in 1967 and to Gorbachev's in 1989. We went to Harrogate in 1990 so I could deliver a paper on "The End of Ideology in the Communist Party of the Soviet Union." I traveled Europe in 1986 visiting various Soviet specialists. I spent time at Stanford University researching my communism book. I spend another summer at Fordham University in the Bronx studying the relationship between religion and revolution in the Soviet experience. Ten or so times I traveled to Amsterdam to give different papers relating to altruism before European colleagues from both west and east Europe. No doubt you've all experienced something quite similar.

Post-retirement changed all that. We still travel but we often take the grandchildren along. We shepherded them to Paris, London, and Coolangata, Australia. The grandkids plan the trips and I fight to keep up with them, whether we're on a beach and investigating tide pools or racing to catch a subway. I slept very well at night.

So travel has become pleasure rather than business, but without my realizing it a new career was gestating. Jeanne Casstevens, my colleague Tom's wife, had broken into novel publication in a big way in the 90's and I became a fan of the type of historical romances she was writing. They were set in the Regency period, roughly 1810 to 1820 when George IV was made regent to support his ailing father, George III. This was an exciting period because not only was the industrial revolution creating havoc with British customs, but also the war with

Napoleon's France held center stage. Jeanne has published over thirty novels based on that period. There are over fifty authors in the genre who wrote many books and I richly enjoyed them all.

This reading began before I retired. I recall giving a test and reading a Regency romance while the students wrote their answers. One young lady put her test on my desk and said, "Are you still reading those women's novels?" I smiled and said yes, but had she wanted to become bored I could have told her quite a story. I would buy used books, return them for credit, and buy others at even more reduced prices. However, I began buying the same book over again. So I found a Mickey Mouse stamp my kids may have left and stamped books I read on the bottom of the book. I forgot that there were frequently more than one copy of a book and so this did not solve my problem at all. I solved my dilemma by not returning the books I purchased, and, as you might imagine, began gathering quite a collection.

Do you recall in graduate school when you sat there listening to someone talking in your field and you said to yourself: "I can do this." Somewhere along the line of reading all those novels I had a similar sort of feeling.

Around this same time when my wife and I were vacationing during the winter months in south Texas, we decided to take a writing course offered to seniors. It turned out to be a life-changer. Our young female instructor made us write every day. One day she suggested we create a scene in a natural setting, such as a woods or city, during a snowstorm. I did this, and I placed my scene in a rural village in Regency England. Our next assignment was to write another two pages about anything we wished and I decided—oh fateful decision—to continue the snowstorm story into two more pages, and then two more.

When she asked us to write a sex scene, I made the characters in my earlier snowstorm assignments play sexual roles. I made the man a bit tipsy from too much wine consumed at dinner, the young lady retiring early to sleep alongside her

aunt, and the barmaid's expectation that the hero would join *her* for the night. However, he mixed up the rooms and slid his naked body into the young lady's already crowded bed.

What made it both sexy and hilarious was that she was trying to get his hands off her body, get him out of her bed, all without waking her aunt who was in bed with her. I had fun writing it, and my instructor seemed pleased. So I simply continued the story after the course finished, went back to give it a proper beginning, and took it further all the way to the end where, of course, the young lady and the young man embrace and decide to face the future together.

Meanwhile, my collection of Regency romances grew so large it forced my wife's books off the shelves into boxes, something I still hear about years after the dirty deed was done. I now have nearly 3,600 regency novels in my study. I have read all of them many times. They are arranged alphabetically by author's last name, so I start at the A's and work my way through. I'm on my third trip and I'm currently at the esses.

In the midst of all that reading I finished writing my first novel and gave it to my wife, my daughter, and a few female friends for critical comment. I had thoroughly enjoyed researching the period, what women wore, how they talked, what men wore, and what their hobbies were. I had to learn the physical layout of London, the names of the streets back then, and where the roads leading out of London led. This research gave me just as much satisfaction as my earlier research on communism, Leninism, or Marxism. The whole experience of novel writing was most satisfying. Such self-directed work seemed to fulfill Marx's notion that we shouldn't work to eat, but eat to work. It was fun and I was sorry to see it finished. I mean it possessed my mind the way serious stuff did before. I would wake up at three am and go down to the computer to give life to another idea. When I finished the first novel, I thought I might be done, but my muse was not finished with me. One morning a short time later I woke up with a very strange thought. If a young lady in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century were to climb high in a tree and a gentleman rode up under the tree

and looked up, would he see anything interesting under her skirts? Where this idea came from I have no idea. Don't ask anyone from Psych because I won't like the answer.

So what could he see? Consider that she's wearing a gown down to her shoe tops and you might suggest "nothing" or "shoes" as your answer. But if she were wearing thin, much washed muslin and no petticoats because it's so hot, maybe the view would be, well, interesting. At this point my wife usually grumbles about dirty old men, so if you're thinking the same thing you're in good company.

I put the heroine up among the top branches composing music in her head and watching the road below the tree. Then a young man on a white horse appeared on the road and stopped for a break under the tree. When he looked up he did see enough to make the story interesting, but my point here is that now I needed a reason or two for her to be up in this huge tree, and a reason for the man to be riding on this road. The tree part became chapter three in that book which was published under the title *A Dreamer's Escape*. The author's name is Jamie Richards because I thought Jamie sounded either a female or male name and is a form of my first name. Richards is actually my middle name pluralized. But if you turn the page you will find the copyright is in my real name. No hiding. Really. Only enough to get potential customers to pick up the book. On the back of the book it tells how I met my wife in a dancing studio.

While people were still reading and critiquing this and my first novel, I stopped off for coffee with a friend in south Texas who wanted to talk about writing and how she could do it. So I asked her if she remembered anything from her childhood that could be turned into a story. She said certainly; she and her girlfriend used to talk to a rabbit whenever they went for a walk. The rabbit answered back. It was probably around the time that Jimmy Stewart was talking to a large rabbit named Harvey. But I asked her if she would mind if I took her idea of a talking rabbit and wrote a book around it. She said no, not at

all, but just to be safe I had her sign a statement saying that she freely gave me the idea.

So I now had an idea and I made it two rabbits, Harry and Agatha and the suspicion that they talked to each other was built into the story. The title of that book is *Harry's Agatha* and it begins with our heroine in bed with two other females who lack the price of a bed by themselves. She has no money to spare and is on her way to London in reply to an advertisement for a companion to an elderly lady. On the last leg of her journey to London, a young man carrying a box joined her in the carriage. Inside the box are the two rabbits. The carriage is badly driven, and crashes alongside the highway. Our heroine is injured and so is the young man. A misogynist earl rescues them. He has to hire the local barmaid "Sister Sally" to assist him in caring for his patients. And so the story began.

The dreamer book and the rabbit book are both in print and are available. They are trade paperbacks and cost more so take a heavy purse with you to the bookstore. Put my name up in Google and you'll discover some of my out of print books. Put up Jamie Richards, however, and you will find electronic versions of my two novels and also paperback versions. The publisher did not like my first novel and so it is still gathering dust until I can rejuvenate it.

But she did like my fourth. This one is being published right now and is titled *Antonia's Daring Deception*. It's the tale of a young physician's daughter living in Kent who wants to become a doctor like her father. When she runs up against absolute prejudice she disguises herself as a male and for the next few years is a male medical student. A major problem develops, however, when she falls in love with one of her patients in the hospital who does not know she is female! And she can't tell him without blowing years of careful study and dedication. A real problem! How can you handle this sort of relationship?

Antonia was just accepted for publication two months ago. I am already working on another, but I only have about 157 pages done. Much of that story is yet to be told. And I need time to sit down at the keyboard and play this instru-

ment. No it's not a pianoforte as they were called back in the Regency period, it's an iMac computer, Microsoft Word, and my imagination.

Believe me it's fun. Oh sure, some days go better than others, but when the gods smile the words just pour out of my fingers and the characters seem to write the story themselves. Does that sound crazy to you? It really happens. The story takes turns that you did not plan; your characters say things you never thought they would. My retirement has been full of very enjoyable activities.

You know what? You don't have to wait until you retire. Did you see the story in the Detroit Free Press about David MacGregor, the playwright, who was sitting in his college office when he heard the sound of an electric razor. An entire play popped into his head. This happens. You just have to be open to it.

Do yourself a favor. Are you in your office? Door open? See the next student or colleague coming or going? Or look out of the window and watch an interesting person. Sit down at your computer and make up a story about where they've been, what they're thinking, and where they want to go and whom they meet on their way. This is called creating and you can be just like the deity in Genesis, you can make whatever you wish happen. Want to make it a mystery? Have them enter a classroom to find the professor on the floor. Want to make it a romance? Have your Mr. Right meet Miss Lovely in the hall and wouldn't you know it they're both in the same class. Tell the story with your fingers on the keyboard. Tell it your way. If you are in art history have your people meet in a gallery, or in Florence in front of David. If you are in economics, place your hero in the north of England where machines are taking over in the mills men and women are unemployed and starving. Have your heroine discover the dangerous work children did in the mills, in the mines, or in the chimneys of London. If you are in music, make your hero live downstairs from Beethoven and grow tired of the noise from his pianoforte. An engineer?

Build some roads and become acquainted with why macadamizing the roads was such an improvement.

One page today, and maybe another tomorrow. What's that you say? You have classes to teach, meetings to attend, and stuff like that? Yeah. Leave the interference behind! Retire! Start another career. Your brain is not old just because your body is showing signs of age. Actually, if you try, you've nothing to lose but your chains. Simply imagine.

The world awaits.