

LIVING IN RETIREMENT | Janet Bodnar

How to Find Your Sense of Purpose

In my January column, I promised to respond to a request from reader Michael Brletich. After two years of an enjoyable retirement, “my sense of purpose remains elusive,” Brletich writes. “I would appreciate any insight you might have about finding one’s sense of purpose in retirement.”

That’s a tall order, Mr. Brletich, and a very personal one, but I’ll give it a try. First, let me assure you that you are not alone. In a joint study on retirement by Edward Jones and Age Wave, 31% of respondents who had been retired for less than five years said they have struggled to find a sense of purpose.

In general, the solution falls into one of three buckets, says Age Wave CEO Ken Dychtwald. “For a sizable portion of the population, it means getting involved with your place of worship or spiritual pursuits,” says Dychtwald, coauthor with Robert Morison of *What Retirees Want*. “For others, it means using your talents in service to others. And for some it means doing what you’ve always wanted to do.”

How to find your niche? Start by talking to other retirees to gather ideas. “Ask yourself what gave you a sense of purpose before and what you can carry over into your new life,” says Mary R. Donahue, coauthor with Alexandra Armstrong of *Your Next Chapter*.

Then make a list of all the things that pique your interest and organize them based on your preferences: Would you like to continue working for pay, or do you want to make a contribution to your community? Would you like to work with young people, the elderly or some other group? Do

you enjoy spending time at the computer or outdoors? Do you prefer structure or flexibility? Would you like to try your hand with something completely different?

Donahue has arranged her categories on a vision board, using pictures and other visual reminders of things she’d like to do in retirement. But that’s not everyone’s cup of tea. For her retirement, Armstrong, chairman emeritus of the financial planning firm she founded in Washington, D.C., chose several nonprofits that would value her knowledge of investing and finance.

The point is, focus on your interests and visualize them. “If you can envision it, it helps it become real,” says Donahue, a psychologist. (Note:

religions,” says Donahue. “It’s a way of coming to terms with the whole life experience.”

Besides spirituality, faith communities offer opportunities for socializing, volunteering and other activities. *Kiplinger’s* reader Douglass Lewis is active in A Christian Ministry in the National Parks, an interdenominational ministry that sends several hundred young adults into national parks to work in hospitality jobs and lead weekend worship services for park visitors and residents. “The experience is challenging and enriching for these young people,” says Lewis.

Lewis’s work combines religion and mentorship, another fulfilling path for retirees. “So many people leave behind a satisfying career and wonder

how to make their retirement years as meaningful,” says Marci Alboher, vice president at Encore.org and author of *The Encore Career Handbook*. “One way is by being a mentor or coach.” Alboher says the best way to find mentoring opportunities is to talk to people in your area (or sign up for the communications stream at www.encore.org). She is an adviser to Girls Write Now, a group of girls in New York City who are interested in writing. Says Alboher, “It’s a way of finding purpose by connecting across the generations.” ■

RELIGION AND MENTORSHIP ARE BOTH FULFILLING PATHS FOR RETIREES.

I’m compiling my own list of possible post-pandemic volunteer activities.)

Keeping the faith.

Don’t underestimate the role of religion in helping you find a sense of purpose. “People in their older years tend to become more active in, or return to, the religion of their childhood—or investigate new



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