

SIGNS THAT YOU'RE READY TO RETIRE

When I retired at the age of 62 as a partner at a major law firm, I had enjoyed a long and successful career practicing law. I had positive feelings toward practicing and toward my firm, but I finally decided I'd had enough of lawyering. This decision wasn't made suddenly – it was the product of much reflection over an extended period. I retired because I observed – and ultimately heeded – a number of signs that collectively signaled me that it was the right step to take. Here are some signs that you may be ready to retire:

Sign No. 1. On weekday mornings, you stay in the shower a few minutes longer than usual. You linger at the breakfast table over coffee and the daily newspaper. Instead of arriving at the office at 9 or 9:30 a.m., as you once did, it's now more often in the 10-to-10:30 range.

When this happens, your body is telling you something. For me, it was that the zest I used to feel about tackling the day's work challenges wasn't there anymore and was unlikely to return.

Sign No. 2. After an hour of hard negotiating with the other side, you settle the major issue between the parties. Although a number of less significant questions remain unresolved, you excuse yourself from the meeting, leaving your younger colleague to handle the rest. When later that week your colleague brings you the draft agreement, rather than read it through, you ask him or her to point out the sections that resolve the disputed issues, and you scan only those portions.

One of the most important qualities for any lawyer to possess is intensity. I had it in spades for a long time, and then in recent years it waned. My brain was all right, but without intensity, I had become less of a lawyer than I once was.

Sign No. 3. You daydream about what you would like your practice to be. My fantasy was helping clients on strategy and judgment calls, and letting my younger colleagues implement the advice.

But lawyering isn't like that. Clients want you to deal with their problems. And when you're no longer willing to get down in the trenches, you've got a real problem.

Sign No. 4. You're telling your client how to handle something – explaining why the course you recommend is preferable, although it's not the precise path he wants to follow. But the client is resisting your repeated advice. Suddenly, you find yourself blowing up at him or her.

Yes, in recent years, I blew up on occasion. Even when I controlled myself, I probably treated a few clients with less respect than they deserved. In retrospect, I think I finally became a little tired of pursuing other people's agendas – which is the very essence of what we, as lawyers, are supposed to be doing.

Sign No. 5. New business is the lifeblood of a lawyer's practice. Although hustling legal business isn't everyone's favorite pastime, everyone has to do his or her share. When you find yourself less and less interested in marketing your practice and more and more interested in your hobbies, you probably aren't willing to do your share anymore. At parties I found myself talking more and more to the caterers (about cooking) and the musicians (about composers) than I did to clients and potential clients who had been invited to the party.

Sign No. 6. The business page carries an item about a new initiative being taken by a company you used to represent. Hopeful that you may be able to land some of the legal work, you place a call to your former contact at the company. You're put through to someone with a voice reeking of adolescence who tells you your contact "uh, like, retired a while back." The same young person turns out to be your

contact's replacement and good friends with your most junior partner.

Even when you get the urge to solicit business, it's not so easy anymore. I suspect that most of us are embarrassed to admit that we've noticed this kind of thing happening; but I'm willing to wager I wasn't the only old fogy around.

Sign No. 7. You have always prided yourself on being a mentor to younger lawyers. Gradually, however, you realize that the young associates you mentored have all matured into accomplished lawyers, doing their own deals and uncomfortable with you looking over their shoulders. Meanwhile, the younger lawyers who need the mentoring still seek it – but from that first group who were once your protégés! They wouldn't think of “bothering” you.

Well, this may overstate the case somewhat – and it's another kick in the shins that's not easy to acknowledge – but my observation is that as you age there's less opportunity to perform the kind of mentoring role you found so rewarding in earlier days. And then, as your coaching hours decline, another worthwhile aspect of legal practice is diminished.

Sign No. 8. You have a healthy ego, taking pleasure in the approval you receive from others for your achievements. Recently, however, you notice that the bulk of the kudos coming your way relate to past accomplishments.

I consider increasing frequency of rebuffs to the ego as central to the retirement decision. No matter what interests you intend to pursue in retirement, this much is clear: You're voluntarily giving up the one thing you're best at and best known for. If the ego gratifications of continuing in practice are undiluted, this is hard to do. When the bag is mixed, you're more likely to step down.

Sign No. 9. You hear the following words echoing in your ear as you undertake each new assignment: “Been there, done that.”

Those of you with mountains yet to climb in your practice have good reason for sticking around. If you're like I was – having done what you set out to do, and now simply repeating yourself with no

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particular heights to conquer – then the reasons to stay drop away.

Sign No. 10. Your interests outside of the law – particularly those that hold out the promise of self-improvement – begin exerting a powerful pull, and you long to give them fuller vent than they've enjoyed up to now.

This is what happened to me, in terms of writing, teaching, music, and photography.

Sign No. 11. When you open up the morning paper, you begin with a quick perusal of the obituaries. Even when you are enjoying health (as I am, knock on wood), intimations of mortality can start to creep in once you pass sixty. A sense of the days dwindling down can weigh heavily on your decision to stay in practice if there are things outside of the law that you want to undertake or accomplish.

Sign No. 12. You research elder hostels and get your AARP card laminated.

That's it, you're ready.

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