



Winter 2021

Retirement Can Be Tough; Jazz Can Help

By

Michael B. Friedman

For some, retirement brings immediate happiness; but for many, there's a tough period of adjustment. Without work you can lose social contacts, a way to fill your time, your sense of who you are, your self-esteem, and your source of meaning in life. Those who struggle with retirement find many ways to recover well-being. Grandparenting, volunteering, even playing golf work for some people. Creative arts are the salvation for many people. Playing jazz, in my experience, is especially fulfilling.

Why?

According to Martin Seligman, the "father" of positive psychology, the major components of well-being are positive emotions, social connections, engagement and immersion in satisfying activities, personal achievement, and a sense of meaning. Playing jazz addresses all of these.

Positive Emotions: For starters, playing jazz can be fun. Not always, of course. Sometimes it is a struggle to play what you hear inside. Sometimes, the best you can do is to play by rote. But when body and musical soul are in sync, it is an incredible pleasure.

Playing jazz also often involves reaching into yourself and discovering emotions that are new to consciousness. Raw emotional energy can be released in the driving rhythms of soul or Latin jazz. Emotional tensions can be expressed with the close, somewhat dissonant harmonies of modern jazz.

And when your emotions are disturbing, jazz can also help. As the title of an old Horace Silver album suggests, "Blowing The Blues Away" is one of the functions jazz. And not just the blues. Playing jazz can also quell fears and focus the mind.

Social Connection: Social isolation is one of the greatest challenges of retirement. Again, playing jazz can help by connecting you with people who share your interests. But, more profoundly, jazz connects people with a cultural community. To play jazz together, especially to improvise together, means sharing a language, a history, and a culture with rich traditions. All of this can gather in a powerful, shared, unconscious connection.

Yes, you can play together by the numbers—just follow a chord pattern and stick to a rhythm. But at its best, ensemble playing is an intense union of feeling and spirit.

This unity of spirit can include an audience. There are remarkable moments of all being locked together in a collective excitement, a collective joy, a collective—well choose your own word.

Engagement and Immersion In Activity: Being active is a key to successful retirement, and the most important activities are those you get so immersed in that you lose track of time. Playing jazz in public or even for personal pleasure takes practice. Of course, that's not always fun, but sometimes it is more than fun. Sometimes there are breakthroughs in skill or creative discoveries that are great moments of personal satisfaction.

Personal Achievement: Many people who retire are satisfied with just feeling good about their lives, but many others want to continue to grow and develop. Playing jazz is something you can work at and get better at, perhaps growing from imitation to innovation and developing your own style.

This does not mean that you need to become top-notch professional players. It is far more about achieving your personal best than about becoming as good as the best players in the world.

Meaning: Finding a sense of meaning after retirement is a tremendous challenge for many people. Work, at its best, provides a sense of purpose, of contribution, and of making a difference. But there is more to meaning than purpose and contribution, and jazz—like other arts—can help you to find meaning through artistic expression.

In philosophical terms, creative art is the pursuit of “beauty”, not the beauty of a pretty sunset but the sort of beauty that goes beyond the sensuous surface of the work of art—beyond the image, beyond the sound, beyond the words. At its best, art is a kind of transcendence, and playing jazz can provide an experience of transcendence. At its very best, playing jazz takes you beyond the routine repetition of rhythms and chord changes. Time is suspended. You are transported beyond the everyday to a dimension of experience that is rich with connections, discovery, spirit, and meaning.

Well-Being In Old Age: The challenge of retirement is to achieve psychological well-being despite the losses that are part and parcel of leaving work behind. Jazz is just one way to do this; but for those who play, it is a wonderful way.

(Michael Friedman is a retired social worker and social advocate who is also a semi-professional jazz pianist and photographer. www.michaelbfriedman.com)