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My Father's Active Retirement and Why I Plan to Follow in His Footsteps

My father pursued outdoor activities, while my mother watched soaps. He stayed healthy; she didn't.

posted by [John Stark](#), June 11, 2013 [More by this author](#)



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When my parents were in their late 60s, they figured the time had come to enjoy their golden years. In those days I worked for a magazine in New York City, and I remember when they called me at my office to break the news. "Your mother and I are retiring," my father told me. "We are really excited."

They had sold their San Francisco Bay Area home of 30 years, where I grew up, and closed down their small tool-making business.

"Here, I'll let your mother fill you in," my father said, putting Mom

on the phone. "We bought a house in the Gold Country," she explained. "Our backyard borders Yosemite National Park. Wait! You see it — it's so beautiful there. We can finally do everything we always wanted to."

And for the next 16 years, they did just that, only in different ways. They each had their own definition of the word "retirement."

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Their new house was part of a gated development spread out over thousands of acres. Although it included a community clubhouse and swimming pool, there wasn't much of a community. The housing lots were so large — several acres each — that you could barely see your neighbors. The twisty, two-lane roads inside the development had no sidewalks, and they were so steep and narrow that you risked your life when you walked along them.

From my parents' living room window you could see coyotes slinking across the front yard at twilight. My parents didn't know when they bought the place that it was in the heart of tarantula country. During mating season, the hairy spiders were quite prevalent. My father wasn't afraid to pick them up, since they weren't poisonous — he even liked to pet them. My mother, on the other hand, had a paralyzing fear of spiders, especially big, furry ones. One time she went to turn on the garage light and encountered a tarantula on the switch plate. My father, hearing her screams, transported the terrified arachnid to safer ground.

For my father, their new location was heaven on earth. To him, being retired meant he had the time to be as active as he'd always wanted to be. Whenever I visited my parents, he'd be outside from dawn to nightfall, rototilling the front yard, planting vegetable gardens and using his power tools to build everything from wooden decks to trellises to a gazebo with a hot tub.

The new location was heaven for my mother as well — despite the pesky tarantulas — but not because it offered outdoor activities. To her, being retired meant she'd earned the right to do

whatever she wanted, even if that meant doing nothing at all. There'd be no problem filling that goal here.

My Mom wasn't lazy. She worked hard all of her life, mostly as a typist and secretary, and raised two boys. But she never shared my father's enthusiasm for taking on projects, especially outdoor ones. She liked yards and gardens, just not their upkeep. And truth is, she never had my father's energy — but who did? Her passions were bridge, playing the piano and, after she retired, making scrapbooks. In her new setting, she was pretty isolated. Here, she couldn't even walk to a grocery store: A trip to the mall in Fresno was an hour's drive away.

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As years passed, my mother became increasingly housebound. After a postal truck delivered the mail, she'd get in the car and drive to the mailbox, which was located at the end of their very long driveway. Over time her muscles and joints became weaker, and before too long she had to have both of her hips replaced. Whenever I visited my parents, Dad would be outside indulging in his latest hobby, flying remote-controlled airplanes or chasing their pug puppy around the yard. I once found him reading a book on how to hang glide. Mom's days were usually spent in the family room, watching the soaps on TV and eating snack food. Each time I visited, she had put on more weight.

In 2001 my parents, now in their 80s, moved on to another stage of life — to an assisted living complex in San Jose, close to my brother. Although they both lived for a few more years after that, they were in markedly different states of health. My mother spent her final years in a wheelchair; she no longer had the strength to walk. And her memory was mush. (Am I wrong to put some blame on *All My Children* and *The Days of Our Lives*?) Just months before my father died of natural, age-related causes, he was still driving his pickup and hauling groceries. Until his dying breath, he was as mentally sharp as he'd always been.

Now that I'm in my 60s, my turn to retire is approaching — quicker than I can believe. And I already know how I will approach my golden years. I won't take old age lying down. Instead, I'm going to follow my father's example. I will to do everything I can to stay as active as possible.

Except for picking up tarantulas.

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