

Empty Nesters to What Nexters?

The Empty Nest Syndrome: a problem or an opportunity?

■ by Deepak Mahtani

Deepak questions the worldly view of retirement according to which you put your feet up and indulge yourself. God may be calling us to an even more fulfilling active life, and our new freedom gives us opportunities we only dreamed of. He illustrates his theme with many surprising life stories.



How often have you heard people say: ‘the kids have flown the nest’, ‘we now have an empty nest’, so ‘now I can put my feet up and retire’? While we might often have heard these expressions, and may even have spoken them ourselves, I would like to ask this question: are these really biblical and spiritual concepts? As I have been reflecting on them, I do not believe so. The Lord’s view on life and retirement is far different from that of the world. You never retire in the Kingdom of God!

There are people in the world today who are increasingly finding themselves as ‘empty

nesters’ as a result of the baby boom of the 1950s and 60s. Often they have very little sense of purpose. However, I do not believe we need to resign ourselves to watching life pass us by and just ‘making time’. Rather, I believe it is a God-given opportunity that He may use in a very special way.

As I attend different conferences and seminars and read articles through the Christian media both in the UK and abroad, I often hear comments that seem to suggest that our generation has made so many mistakes. We are blamed for churches closing down and younger generations leaving the church in increasing numbers and giving up on their faith. Many have accepted this by resigning and entering into a state of repentance and prayer, which is not necessarily a bad thing, in and of itself.

However, as I meet peers from different walks of life, there seems to be a growing sense that God is raising up a new generation. But this is not the youth generation, as is commonly surmised (though that may be happening as well). It is our generation – those of us now in our 50s and 60s that I believe form this ‘new generation’.

Our generation of early 50s to late 60s are in a unique position, unlike any generation before them. We were born in the 1950-60s. ▶▶



▶▶ We have had a period of political and economic stability which our parents, who experienced and lived through World War II, did not enjoy. In fact, considering the state of the economy since 2008, many economists take the view that perhaps for the first time in a few decades the generation that succeeds us may not be as prosperous materially as we are, that seems to have peaked around 2007!

Many of us have grown up in stable homes, enjoyed a good education, and more or less succeeded in our careers. We have a reasonable amount of savings, perhaps own a house, have paid off the mortgage, and have children who are now either in university or employed and some who are even married themselves with their own children. Despite ongoing conflicts and major world issues, we have enjoyed decades of a relatively stable and peaceful world which is what has made this possible. What a privileged place to be, and what a privileged generation we are.



Coasting through life

The temptation then becomes to ‘coast’ through life, living a comfortable life, patting ourselves on the back and saying “we deserve a break, this is what we have worked so hard for”. We continue to work and put aside another few thousand pounds a year, and wait till we go to the grave or the Lord takes us to Glory. But is that what will constitute a life well lived?

The alternative is that we can actively and intentionally decide to do things differently. We can stop primarily seeking financial gain, agree on a standard of living (living the simple life is the topic of many recent books and websites), and become open to God’s

opportunities. Examples of people who have been challenged in this area have included those who have decided to cut down their work to four days a week and given the extra day to volunteering activity. Some have taken voluntary redundancy, chosen to downsize their family homes and set up a trust to give to causes close to their hearts. Others have set up charities to fulfil their lifetime dreams. Still others have decided to stop working altogether and live off the income on their capital invested and gone overseas as missionaries or tentmakers.

These are only a handful of stories of people I know personally who have taken on this challenge. A few years ago an ophthalmologist visited some hospitals in India for two weeks. She learnt that India has the largest number (10 million) of people with curable blindness, mainly due to cataracts. She knew that a cataract operation was fairly straightforward and not that costly. When she returned to the UK, she spoke to her husband and two children in their late teens and told them of her vision of reducing her work here and spending three months a year in India performing cataract operations. She set up a small charity five years ago and now performs 1,000 cataract operations a year. Her family sometimes join her on those trips and it has brought the family closer together. ▶▶



Cataract surgery in India

▶▶ Another couple I know in their mid-50s were both in full-time work for many years and active in their church in South London. They felt that now their two children were at University, they had some freedom. After praying, they decided to sell their family home, downsize to a smaller house and move up to Oxford, buying a home with three extra rooms so that they could take in some students to mentor and coach them.

A husband who was a headteacher and wife



Primary school in Molina, Chile, with volunteer UK teaching assistants

who was a secondary school teacher decided to take early retirement and have been supporting schools overseas in Asia and South America with their knowledge and experience. They believe that

we are so blessed with resources and other privileges in the West, and feel compelled to share these with those less fortunate. In their own words “the little we are able to contribute goes much further in those countries.”

Yet another couple moved from the north of England, giving up their jobs, and felt they needed to relocate to Bournemouth. They have since been actively involved in teaching English and providing social support for immigrants and asylum seekers. They have found this more rewarding than anything they have ever done before.

Charles Handy writes in *The Age of Unreason* that we have four purposes in life: to live, to love, to learn and to leave. The question is: what are you leaving? In other words, what is the legacy you are leaving to the world? This is a fundamental question that we all need to face as responsible citizens who have sojourned on this earth.

God can and does use each one of us for His purposes whatever our age. The two criteria for Him to use us most effectively seem to be

availability and obedience. He also uses us whoever we are and whatever we have, not when we are “fully sorted” and financially stable. While the focus of this article is people in their 50s and 60s, this does not exclude those in their 70s and 80s who continue to enjoy the benefits of good health and mobility. In fact they may have had such a fulfilling time in their 50s and 60s that they feel they cannot but continue into their latter years!

Having said that, I do believe that the generation I am talking about occupies a unique place in history. It has been said: When you are young, you have all the energy, but no money and no time. When you are middle aged, you have a lot more money and energy, but no time. When you are much older, you have more money, more time, but no energy.



Asylum Seekers in Calais, hoping to settle in UK

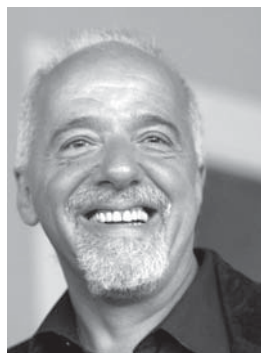
The majority of us go through these stages of life:

- in our 20s and 30s we work long, hard hours to make a mark in our professional work and to build our family
- in our 40s we try to consolidate our career and see our children through university and settled in a job and family
- in our 50s and 60s we have a greater freedom in our use of time, money and resources
- in our 70s and 80s perhaps we will have to slow down due to age and may even have health concerns



▶▶ Looking at it in these terms, it seems to me that the 50s and 60s are crucial years in which to make a difference and do things differently. We who in our early 50s to late 60s, the empty nesters or ‘what nexters’ as I call them, have some treasured possessions that very few have. I refer to these as our distinctives or in management jargon, our USP (unique selling proposition):

- we have a level of financial security with savings which means that many of us do not need to work to pay next month’s bills
- we have some experience and wisdom – largely gained through our own mistakes. Sharing these mistakes with the next generation is invaluable. Igor Stravinsky once said: ‘I have learned throughout my life as a composer chiefly through my mistakes, not by my exposure to founts of wisdom and knowledge.’¹
- we have more flexibility with our time than we ever had as we are not limited by the responsibility of children at home
- many of us still have a good level of health and energy perhaps like never before.



Paulo Coelho

The questions we need to ask are: What are we doing with these distinctives? and what and who are we investing in? The answers begin with taking the first step of being willing to take time to re-evaluate and ask some deep and important questions, or as Paulo Coelho writes in *Like the Flowing River*: ‘I’m not doing anything and yet I’m also doing the most important thing a man can

do: I’m listening to what I needed to hear from myself’.²

Through my work I am privileged to meet and coach many senior executives and people who have everything in earthly terms. Yet when I ask them to review their lives, they invariably tell me they have so many regrets. Almost without fail they say: I wish I had travelled the world, spent more time with my kids, did this or didn’t do that.

My advice to them and all of us is this: stop regretting and start living. Start doing things that are truly important so that you won’t have to look back on your life with regrets. Barbra Streisand once sang : ‘A fool will lose tomorrow reaching back to yesterday.’³ How very true.



Barbra Streisand

One of the greatest challenges we need to confront in our minds is that of success vs. significance. The world tells us that the aim of life is success. However, I believe the true aim of life is to be significant. It is beneficial to take a moment and consider the differences:

Success

- Comes and goes with the ebbs and flows
- Ends on the day you die
- Always looks out to gain more

Significance

- Is not dependent on the economy
- Your impact carries on
- Always looks out to give more



▶▶ Leo Rosten, a 20th Century Polish teacher, once said: “I cannot believe that the purpose of life is to be ‘happy’. I think the purpose of life is to be useful, to be responsible, to be compassionate. It is, above all to matter: to count, to stand for something, to have made some difference that you lived at all.”⁴

God is calling and raising a new generation of what I call McMassMiss – Middle Class, Middle Aged, Self-Supporting Missionaries. Are you one of them? If you feel you have nothing left to offer, remember that God delights in taking the insignificant and making something significant out of it. He takes the natural and turns it into something supernatural. Down through history we can see the pattern, as reflected in this poem:

*Shamgar had an ox goad;
Rahab had a string.
Gideon had a trumpet;
David had a sling.
Samson had a jawbone;
Moses had a rod.
Dorcas had a needle;
all were used for God.⁵*

The question that God is asking us today is this: ‘what’s in your hand? If you are willing, I can use it to build my Kingdom.’

In his latest (30th) book, *Nearing Home: Thoughts on Life, Faith, and Finishing Well*⁶, Billy Graham at 93 years of age, writes: ‘Growing old has been the greatest surprise of my life. I would have never guessed what God had in store for me, and I know that as I am nearing home, He will not forsake me the last mile of the way. Explore with me

not only the realities of life as we grow older but also the hope and fulfilment and even joy that can be ours once we learn to look at these years from God’s point of view and discover His strength to sustain us every day.’

Live your eternal destiny and calling today. Today is the beginning of the rest of your life. The impact we could have on the problems of the world – poverty, climate change, AIDS, broken marriages, families and orphans could just be colossal if we heed this challenge.

Turn your twilight years into ‘truelight’ years. They will turn out to be the best years of your life! ■



Dorcas had a needle

Deepak Mahtani and his wife Celia, following God’s leading, gave up their careers and their home, leaving their 2 university-aged children behind in the UK to move to Hong Kong for 9 months in 2010. This followed a year of questioning and seeking wisdom for their future and a clear message to be “a father and mother to orphans that God wants to turn into His sons and daughters.” The first outworking of this was to take care of Deepak’s niece (30) and nephew (27) who lost their parents a few years ago and had serious emotional, financial and spiritual needs.

Deepak is an award-winning management consultant, international speaker, philanthropist and entrepreneur based in Surrey.



1. Probably said in a radio interview in the 1950s.
 2. From *A January Day in 2005* (pp. 81-83), Harper, 2007.
 3. From the song “I’ll never love this way again” originally recorded by the American soul singer Dionne Warwick in 1979, composed by Richard Kerr (music) and Will Jennings (lyrics).
 4. From *Passions and Prejudices, or, Some of my best friends are people*, McGraw-Hill, 1978.
 5. Popular US Biblebelt song, with variations, including ‘Mary had some ointment’, anonymous.
 6. Nelson, 2011.