



A Day in the Life of a Seventy-Two-Year-Old: Me!

By Khalil Nakhleh



The descriptive term “retirement” keeps popping up almost every time I encounter new people. Those who don’t know me ask me: *Where are you working now? Are you teaching at Birzeit?* “No, I am retired,” I answer swiftly. “Retired from what?” they quip. I realize then my mistake. Upon reflection, I should have explained that I am not “retired” in the usual sense of the word; I should have emphasized that I “retired myself” from any formal work commitment with any formal institution, governmental or non-governmental alike. It was my conscious decision to withdraw my availability for any actual or potential engagement in any paid consultancy work as of 31 March 2010. In retrospect, it was one of the wisest decisions I have ever taken. It set me free to benefit from enjoyable opportunities that I couldn’t otherwise.

Retirement, in the dictionary sense of the term, is tantamount to “withdrawal from active life...into seclusion.” Such understanding of retirement, however, is laden with negative connotations. My daily life, since I took that important decision a little over five years ago, reverses this negativity and replaces it with free, unfettered energy, both physical and intellectual. Since then, my mental and physical concerns and preoccupations, which characterized my life while “on the job,” have burst with determination and commitment, but without the concomitant and ubiquitous frustrations, hypocrisies, lies, and the ever-present practice and control of sham and imagined petty power, which many in positions of authority love to mete out! Notwithstanding my starting teaching position at St. John’s University in Minnesota, the bulk of



Entrance to our country home in Rameh.

Voluntary retirement marks the beginning of a new life—active, creative, and engaging—if YOU will it!

my career was rather removed from the actual scene, subject to the exigency of boards of trustees, project managers, director generals or ministers. Whether I was the director of programs, the team leader of a European-funded project, the technical consultant for all EU-funded educational projects, or the head of a National Commission at the Ministry of Higher Education, I was subjected to the irrational and often ignorant whims and opinions of those technically responsible for me, who always insisted on micro-managing the programme—and often by “remote control”—without having the slightest idea about what it is that I actually do!

My typical day is divided into semi-rigid segments, but subject to frequent auto-review lest I fall in the trap of deadly routines which, at this stage of my life, could be potentially destructive. My daily or weekly concern is to pre-empt myself from enslavement to the highly organized, rigidly structured work parameters which dominated my life since 1972! My daily or weekly concern is to rethink my understanding and perceptions of an actually living, active, and healthy “homeland,” and how I can make it so with the “small” things I do. Thus, I find myself insistently driven to do less talk and more action; to translate my life into a positive example that can

be emulated, rather than dwelling on or theorizing about what ought to be. I invest hours in maintaining, cleaning, and beautifying the small garden surrounding our building to demonstrate that the natural, organic, environmentally-friendly, somewhat drought-resistant, can surround you with beautiful arrangements of contrast and colour. Intentionally, I spend hours in walking and hiking, notwithstanding the time of the day or weather conditions; sometimes I manufacture objectives in al-Manara or al-Bireh to walk to. I rarely feel bored, as there is always something to do.

Specifically, I try to engage myself in physical activities on a daily basis. I initiate my day by committing to some formal type of physical training of my body (for recurrent “maintenance” rather than “body-building”) at the “Tri-Fitness” gym in al-Bireh, where I have had paid annual membership since 2000. I try to begin my active day with it, for a couple of hours, four or five days a week. Since I live in al-Tireh, I drive to the club (one of those rare times where I use the car; otherwise I walk)



A hike at Ein Fara.

around 8:00 or 8:15, depending on the flow of the car traffic on al-Tireh road, as judged from my window.

This is a continuation of my earlier lifestyle, at least since 1984, when I started my work with Welfare Association in Geneva, as the director of programs. In that capacity, I was visiting Palestine for about three weeks at a time, every three months. I had to deal with the “funding founders” of the Association, most of whom were symbols of accrued wealth in the Palestinian shatat (diaspora).

There, I broke my workday at noon, for physical exercise, but now I refresh my living day from the outset, with

the sunrise, about two hours from the time my wife and I wake around 6:00. Without any rush, I move to the kitchen to prepare the daily minimal breakfast that we eat with a cup of green tea. We compare some notes about how our sleeping night went, or any other immediate developments, affecting family, relatives, or the state of the global world.

On my way back from the gym, I stop frequently at my favourite vegetable and fruit store to replenish what we need, and semi-frequently, to get some of Muhannad's hummus or Odeh's nuts.

Take today, for example (Thursday, 18 June, beginning of Ramadan). After

having been ready to go to the gym, without much hesitation I decided to change my clothes and do some pruning, watering, and cleaning in the garden. I did that with my wife's help (and recurrent supervision!) for about three hours, after which I spent another three hours, with my laptop, reading and answering emails; perusing and selectively reading articles from my favourite half-dozen internet news sites. In addition, I spend another three hours or so, interspersed throughout the day and early evening, reading, reflecting on and writing items in the area of whatever research I am involved in currently.

Such a flexible daily schedule affords me the time alone with my wife, making our own fresh juices from raw vegetables and fruits, experimenting with fermentation techniques of selected raw vegetables, fixing our dinners, etc. Since both of us enjoy English speaking films and programs, we often spend our evenings watching TV.

Although it appears that my day is highly regimented, the truth is, that with the exception of the morning period at the Tri-Fitness gym, the rest of the activities merge into one another or alternate without any prescribed order. Sometimes I may walk in the middle of the afternoon to Tamer Institute's Children's Literature Resources Center to listen to a lecture on children's books; or drive to the Ibrahim Abu-Lughod Institute for International Studies at Birzeit University to listen to a talk by the Venezuelan Representative in Ramallah, or the Brazilian Ambassador, or other lectures about the countries of the South that concern me; I may walk in the early evening to “al-Shubbak Muntada” for a launch of a new book, a discussion about current Palestinian poetry, or a new collection of short stories, accompanied with some live music. Abu Ibrahim, who initiated this forum at his own place and from his own resources, wanted to inject

the Ramallah scene with alternative discussions, away from the standard regimented, political-factional, and non-analytical talks. Nevertheless, some of the themes of events I attended have been highly political-cultural.

In the meantime, I participate very selectively and sparsely in the events, seminars, conferences, etc., to which I am frequently invited. I accept invitations to events that I anticipate will possess a great learning value for me, intellectual challenge and insight, and comprehensive inclusiveness and connectivity between Palestine and the world. I abhor redundant, vacuous, and hypocritical speeches and slogans; and since, at this stage of my life, the final choice is in my hand, I always choose to protect myself from such forms of mental torture.

Since 2011, I have been reading, on the average, two books a month, in addition to various articles and reports. Then, I decided to share my readings, with some commentary, as my end-of-the-year gift, by circulating them to a network of friends and acquaintances that I judge to be interested or concerned. I do it in the spirit of giving overt and important endorsement to the act of reading, and of enticing interested people to replicate the experiment.

I am finding myself, more than ever, redirecting my energy, attention, and concerns to my native village al-Rameh in Galilee—the Palestine in which I was born, five years before the Zionist colonization and dismemberment of my land. Each month is typically divided into two-thirds of my time in Ramallah and one-third in al-Rameh. Notwithstanding the intermittent frustration and anguish, my wife and I appreciate our living experiences in the varied aspects of Palestine—the chopped up geography, history, language, environment, and people. In al-Rameh, I took it upon myself to be responsible for the beautification of the Nakhleh cemetery—planting, watering,



With our friend, Dr. Hatim Kanaaneh in the area surrounding the village of Arrabyeh in Galilee.

cleaning, etc. I am hoping to set an emulative example. Likewise, and to emphasize this connection, I made a decision in 2011 to donate my personal library of Arabic holdings—the bulk of which focuses on the history of the Palestinian struggle against Zionism—to the Rameh Public Library.

Happily, my kind of retirement allows me to seize upon and benefit from opportunities as they present themselves, something I could not do during my “pre-retirement” phase. For example, one gorgeous spring Friday, I participated in a daylong hike from Hizma through Wadi al-Qelt with a group of “gym colleagues.” The experience embodied physical, social, and mental rejuvenation for me, and my relationship with this group of colleagues was strengthened. I am constantly invited to repeat similar experiences with them, even though I am more than thirty years older than the eldest among them.

In all of the above, my real transformative reference point has become, without the slightest doubt, my wife—whose health, safety, and ultimate happiness are an integral component of mine!

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“Taxi drivers are always labeled as talkative and that they involve themselves in any story or incident the passenger might have talked about while on the ride. I have a problem: I am not one of those drivers. So, I would always be asked: are you sure you are normal?”

Mohammad Asfour, Taxi Driver