

THE SOCIETY OF THE ELDERBEARS REACHES MIDDLE AGE

Lewis P. Lipsitt

Professor Emeritus of Psychology, Medical Science, and Human Development

In past articles in the *Faculty Bulletin*, I have alluded to the birth of the Society of the Elderbears, the coming of age of the Elderbears, and the achievement of the Elderbears' maturity. It is only fitting, therefore, that with the passage of time and with a plethora of new experiences we should now recognize that the Society of the Elderbears has reached middle age. As a life-span psychologist, I regard this as a critical developmental juncture. Moreover, as a parent figure among the Elderbears society (after all, I was there at the conception), there is no way in which I wish to preside over the senescence of this fine entity. I hope, therefore, that we can regard this as a *stage de plateau*, anticipating with awe and wonder what might follow.

Why should we even be talking of the longevity of the Elderbears? Good question. The answer is that we have succeeded in one of our major life missions. We have given birth to our natural heir. The Faculty Executive Committee presented at the February 6, 2007 faculty meeting a motion to establish a new standing faculty committee, called *Committee on Faculty Retirement*. This motion was initially drafted by the Elderbears, as the culmination of its effort to secure friendly recognition of faculty emeriti as continuing faculty members with distinctive privileges. We are hopeful that the establishment of this committee will assure continuingly friendly and reciprocal relationships of the emeriti with the University.

Members of the Faculty Executive Committee, particularly the most recent chairs (Profs. Robert Pelcovitz and Ann Dill), were especially helpful in bringing our proposal draft proposing the new Committee, for which the late Prof. Mervin Sibulkin was initially responsible, to special clarity, and then on to a vote.

Why would either the Elderbears or a new Committee have been necessary to work toward improved conditions at the University for retired faculty? Another good question. The reason is that, in the past, some retired faculty members considered themselves underused when in fact they wanted to be helpful. They wanted, they told us, to be “on call” for committee work, to be available for mentoring in their areas of expertise, and useful as lecturers in an occasional class when some pinch-hitting and on occasions when their expertise would be jibe with the needs of the course.

Sadly, a small number of retirees regarded themselves as treated more poorly than the term underused would imply. These individuals told us that they felt excluded by their departments and by the University once they had retired. Indeed one faculty member reported that he had been “walked to the door” on the day of his retirement, losing his office suddenly and giving up all secretarial or other support services of his department. Some emeriti reported their retirement as marking the onset of psychological depression -- not uncommon in other occupations and at other institutions, particularly business enterprises where individuals have worked for very long times and regarded themselves at least as witnesses to the success of the company if not a causal element in that success.

Other reasons for faculty retirees coming together in a common mission include their expressed need for continuing association with each other, and the creating of opportunities for an enduring camaraderie with colleagues, both in and out of their

respective departments. Most retirees are eager for intellectual stimulation and social interaction of the sort that university campuses have provided for them during their work life, and now they want to be free to experience those pleasures without fear of even seeming rejection by the institution to which they have been so loyal through many years.

Another area of great concern to faculty retirees is that of health care, medical benefits, and maintenance of physical vigor and well-being. Most retirees claim they have been quite pleased, during their active teaching years, with the University's contributions to their health policies and medical coverage plans even as they complained, as the rest of the population does, about the volatility of their health coverage programs. But then, upon retirement, they were chagrined to realize that their health benefits had dropped – on the day of their retirement – to zero. They were now fully, entirely, completely responsible for their own health plan coverage.

While most retirees can take advantage of Medicare benefits, the supplemental payments became entirely their own responsibility. The Elderbears discovered that some retirees did not even realize they would lose all medical benefits upon retirement. Our exchanges with young faculty members revealed that few give this matter much thought until they begin to approach retirement age. There seem to be two reasons for this: first, they assume (erroneously) that their medical benefits will continue, and secondly, young faculty members tend to presume they are likely to be employed at a different institution when they retire.

The Elderbears have explored other institutions' policies for retired faculty. Most universities, particularly those with which Brown likes to compare itself, have medical benefits for faculty extended into retirement. The size of the benefit varies, but some

provide very liberal benefits. The California system, as an example of a public university, and Amherst College, as a private institution, provide full – i.e., complete, with no cost to the retired faculty member – medical policy coverage. Yale is perhaps a special case, providing free care to all retirees through its own medical school and associated hospitals.

Yale is a special case in another regard. A building on campus is devoted almost entirely to the retirement organization. In these quarters, there are 12 separate offices, with comfortable furniture and a desk, a computer, assistance available, a modest library with easy connections to the main library on campus, refreshments, and areas in which to meet students and colleagues and to host exhibitions of campus artists. Retirees may request and occupy space for specific lengths of time, to work on special projects. This removes the burden on some departments which, when a professor retires, must use that person's office for a new faculty member.

It is perhaps too much to hope to replicate the Yale situation. An alumnus made a gift of \$10,000,000 to Yale to renovate its oldest campus building and to transform it into an elegant faculty retirees' center, with some other service departments occupying space in the same building.

The Society of the Elderbears, until now an independent and essentially informal cohort of retirees (but with a constitution), is pleased with its development thus far, and now looks toward the future with a kind of security it has not had until now. Many of our concerns, we hope, will be carried forward by the newly born Faculty Committee on Retirement. This puts us, we think, in the role of middle-aged parents, a condition which many of you will readily recognize as involving an ambiguous presence. On the one

hand, we stand ready, as a middle-aged parent should be, to provide advice and guidance, and even occasional unwelcome notes of caution. On the other hand, as the Elderbears slowly glide from our current plateau and move more rapidly than we wish into our later years, we hope that our offspring, the New Committee,” will be noticing the needs we have, and will seek to treat our mission with kindness and at least a modicum of pleasure.

Professor Lipsitt, a founder of the Society of the Elderbears, who retired as an “active professor” in 1996, this year celebrates his 50th year as a Brown University faculty member, maintains an office in the Department of Psychology, and continues as a researcher in a long-term study of 4,000 children begun at Brown in 1959. In April he delivers a keynote address at the Middle East and North Africa Regional Conference of Psychology, in Amman, Jordan on “lessons from babies on the importance of pleasure, annoyance, and learning processes over the lifespan.”