

Ma, like everyone, grapples with time

March 10, 2013 by Daniel J. Bauer

I made the following casual observation in an e-mail to a friend in the United States this week: “Not much new to report. The new semester is fairly routine thus far, if anything can be ‘routine’ about my last semester in 27 years in teaching.”

Two hours later, I saw the title of an interesting editorial in a recent issue of *The China Post*. “In the art of quitting,” read that title, “timing is absolutely everything” (3-6-13 p. 4).

The editorial dealt with the large question of whether President Ma Ying-jeou should drop his quest for another term as chairman of the Chinese Nationalist Party (KMT). The writer referred to a bevy of tough poll results on the president, mentioned controversy about the wisdom and even legality of another term, and even opined that Chiang Kai-shek (gasp) should have recognized when to retire, but did not.

You can only mention a certain number of famous folks in a brief piece of journalism before you overwhelm your reader. So, I don’t hold it against this newspaper that the editorial passed over the example of former Pope Benedict XVI. Presumably everyone on Planet Earth knows his was our most recent dramatic example of someone hanging up his spikes and quitting.

My university demands that in normal circumstances an associate professor retire from full time status at the age of 65. When this semester rolls to an end, my “official” career as a college instructor will also end. Truly, these are days full of contemplation for me.

A few days ago, I participated in what was almost certain to be the last hiring committee meeting I’ll ever attend. One of the people my colleagues and I recommended hiring is the person who will take my place. This kind soul will inherit my office, bookshelves, file cabinet, my computer, my desk, and my chair. This lucky person (no sarcasm, I assure you) will also inherit quite a passel of my students.

I’ll stay on campus for a couple of courses, but intend to spend most of my time in the years ahead out of sight. I hope to become an almost full time writer.

We learn how to quit largely by observing others. We observe the people around us and watch what they do. We learn how to let go of position and opportunity not so much by studying the words of those who have gone before us, but by studying their actions.

I have seen colleagues handle the turning point of retirement in ways that will be different than my way. These friends were not run-of-the-mill types like me, but prestigious academics, award-winners, people widely known and respected. Some of these fine people fought tooth and nail (a fine cliché terribly under-appreciated) to stay on beyond their time. They wanted the rules bent to match their views and wishes. In some cases, they left angry and bitter. I guess they felt they’d gotten the wet end of the cigar.

Not me. Oh, no, not me. That is not my way. I sense it is only right to say my good-byes in the coming months. Satisfying projects await me. I have no urge to look behind or to cling to yesterday. I am looking ahead. I want to embrace my tomorrows. I am ready to go.

Taiwan and the world, actually, have an uncomfortably large group of well educated people walking the streets, looking for work as teachers in universities. Many good folks out there are more than able to do my job. If I leave gracefully, perhaps I may be of greater use in the future as a mentor for friends younger than me than I have been in the past.

The editorial on this page last Wednesday that sparked these words today concluded with the thought that President Ma “shouldn’t miss the right time to quit.”

I am not implying that I am so wonderfully wise, or that I find self-acceptance an easy task. I know that I am not always able to recognize when enough is enough. There is still so much yet for me to learn about so many things. Surely the meaning of time in the phrase quoted above begs for deeper analysis than we have given it here.

As the president must grapple with time in his way, the rest of us must grapple with it in our ways. (Father Daniel J. Bauer SVD is a priest and associate professor in the English Department at Fu Jen Catholic University.)

Talking points:

1. This column focuses on the question of quitting, of ending a project or activity, of saying, "This is enough now. Here is a moment to let go of the 'old' and to begin something 'new'. Although you are still young, have you in some ways let go of past moments and said, "yes" to the new?
2. There is a clear difference in university life between full time and part time teachers. Part timers can still however be important to students and give them a lot. Are you aware of who is full time and who is part time among your professors at Fu da? Does this make much difference to you?
3. This column obviously speaks of 'tui hsiou,' of 'retirement.' Do you have any 'retired people' in your life at this time? Any aunts or uncles or grandparents who are retired? Do these retired people still live rich and happy lives in your opinion?

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