

# “Nobody Writes to the Colonel”

## Contemplating a Career’s End

John Lubans Jr.

**M**y title comes from the name of a music club in Riga, Latvia.<sup>1</sup> On first hearing the name in late 1999, it captured something of what I was feeling during my transition from a full-time administrative position to semi-retirement. While “nobody writes to John” would be self-pitying hyperbole, there is an emotional aspect of stepping away from a full-time career after forty years. Now, past that initial separation anxiety, I find myself wondering about my career’s end, even though I do not expect the curtain to go down anytime soon. In 2000 the Colonel and I were both “ebb’d men,” as Shakespeare put it, but not exactly, because neither one of us seemed to be “dear’d by being lack’d.”<sup>2</sup>

When I joined the lot of the semi-retired it left me feeling, shall we say, inconclusive and incomplete. There was much I did not miss about the job: the daily routine; the weekly and monthly standing meetings (yawn); the cyclical strategic planning (gad!); and the carrying out of the organization’s rituals, like performance appraisal, salary reviews, promotions, time sheets, and so on.

But, I did miss leading—and as an active leader, taking action—and the opportunity to achieve and to be recognized. I was confident in my vision, and as long as I had someone minding my back, I was able to bring about positive and productive change. I suppose this comes down to the exercise of *power*—the ability to realize a vision and to apply resources through a collaborative process with like-minded colleagues. Once I handed in my keys, the *ex officio* power evaporated.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps my changed status was most obvious in the reaction of peers in my societal work—the professional association had always been one of my top priorities. I realized my own “loss” of power during an ALA meeting of several dozen organizational development people in

academic libraries. We did a go-around of who we were and what we did. Everyone recited the name of their employer—a stamp of validity—and their title. When it was my turn, I said—momentarily stumped for the lack of provenance—I was a consultant. During the meeting I don’t recall anyone expressing curiosity about my status, even in the round table groups. I was not exactly excluded—I even took part in some of the discussion—but I came away, if not knowing, than *feeling*, I was not one of them anymore. An ebb’d man. And in the profession at large, the marginalization plays out in other ways—some work friends last, while others fade away, some abruptly as a light switched off. To the lasting friends you are a person, to the latter, a dimming node in their social network. That some no longer considered me relevant to their advancement was not a surprise. For me, it was more a realization, a confirmation of a completed business relationship; still, a lingering disappointment flits across the psyche now and then.

One night on an icy street in Denver—at an ALA Midwinter Meeting, no less—I expressed some of these dismal thoughts to a longtime friend and colleague. Perhaps because we were near a symphony hall, I told her how I envied the way the world of music treats its elders. I’d seen placards outside Carnegie Hall and other venues of galas and celebrations for living composers and performers past their glory days. I’d even taken part in one gala where several elderly composers were celebrated with full orchestral performances of their works—a final bow to applause and bouquets. In my mind there was no comparable recognition for librarians. My friend’s response was pragmatic: “It’s a job.” Most librarians have little reason to celebrate those who may have put in longer hours and done some things of significance. Like in most jobs, forty years of librarying well does not rate you a laurel wreath, a victory lap, or much of anything else (besides perhaps a retirement lunch) to mark your departure. The “It’s a job” contingent won’t have any problem segueing into retirement, and there may be something to recommend this unassuming navigation of the workplace.

This year a friend took up his employer’s offer of an early retirement package. He will work a half schedule

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for a few more years, and then step off into the green fields of retirement. He has no regrets, no misgivings about leaving. If anything, he is relieved to be largely out of it. His friends—librarians and many others—remain. He has always had other interests beyond the profession and now those interests will get more time. A retired musician threw some cold water on my perception of the honors paid to retiring musical maestros and virtuosi. (Come to think of it, what profession, besides music, has terms like that for accomplished individuals? Sorry, *emeritus* does not have quite the *je ne sais quoi*.) This musician, afflicted with arthritis, no longer plays, but is still regarded as a virtuoso. For him, the honors paid to the old (like himself) are overrated. When his peers do play, “It’s embarrassing!” Still, they get respect, they teach master classes, and often conduct.



The buggy sign of the Pulkvedim Nevien Neraksta (Nobody Writes to the Colonel) Club. Taken by author, January 25, 2010.

## Men in Yellow Pants

One day in the hall outside my office, I noticed a distinguished looking older man. He was wearing yellow pants, the sort you might see on the golf course but usually not on campus. I discovered a little later that he was a well-regarded library building consultant, now retired, and the author of an important book on the subject. And, as the mood struck him, was puttering around the country checking on library buildings. He had no apparent agenda, just dropping in to see what might be of architectural interest. His motivation was still there, perfectly legitimate if a bit territorial, but the yellow pants were incongruous—a dilettante’s touch. Then again, the yellow pants might have been a statement: I’m on my own time, so I get to do and dress how I want, *a la* the poem, “When I Am Old, I Shall Wear Purple!”<sup>4</sup> I’ve encountered a variation on the yellow pants—the dilettante librarian—and it is less endearing. At conferences, some of the retired speakers are included not by what they have to say, but by their longevity and connection with the group promoting the conference.

Being one myself, I am all for old-timers speaking as long as they have something fresh and well-considered to offer, well-seasoned by reflection, and a candid admission of what has worked and what has not. Like the virtuoso musician, I, too, am embarrassed when a speaker recycles an old talk—one never particularly original, insightful, or

well informed to begin with—and goes on, patronizingly, to lecture an audience on how it is or ought to be.

## Career’s End

My point in this essay has been to show the misgivings, uncertainty, and ambivalence about leaving, and perhaps to imply the error of investing too much of myself, of loving the job’s “power,” of aligning my job too much with who I am. At times, I’ve felt like a golden leaf on a beech tree in winter, reluctant to let go—even in February—until spring buds force me to drop away. So, should we then go gently into the night? Well, not according to Dylan Thomas:

Do not go gentle into that good night,  
Old age should burn and rave at close of day.<sup>5</sup>

I think one’s leaving the profession ought to be somewhere less than “burn and rage” but more than anonymous blog rants or venting in letters to the editor admonishing the wrong-headedness of the profession. If someone in retirement still has something to offer, should not the profession offer a venue? Ideas welcome!

## References and Notes

1. In reality, the club’s name has nothing to do with my imaginary Soviet colonel; instead, it’s a Gabriel García Márquez novelette about a colonel waiting for a pension check. Initially, I thought “nobody’s writing to the colonel” was

a sarcastic political statement about the social fate of the occupying colonels left behind by the 1991 collapse of the Soviet hegemony, and the departure of its despised occupying army. To me this colonel became the Russian expat living in Riga who waits for the next invasion to come sweeping from the East across the farm lands and through the forests, bringing another “revolution” to reclaim his power. Or, less sinisterly, my colonel is more like an acquaintance who, as a VP for a large company, used to fly in corporate jets and get chauffeured to appointments. Now, in retirement, he finds himself just another elderly patient waiting in the doctor’s office—no more going to the head of the line.

2. The “ebb’d man” quote is from Antony and Cleopatra (I. 4. 43) and suggests that one is most missed when missing, as discussed on page 53 of *Shakespeare’s Imagery and What*

*It Tells Us* by Caroline F. E. Spurgeon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

3. John R. P. French Jr., and Bertram Raven, “The Bases of Social Power,” in D. Cartwright and A. Zander (eds.), *Group Dynamics* (New York: Harper and Row, 1960), 607-23, in which they discuss types of power: Coercive, Reward, Legitimate, Referent, and Expert. A leader equipped with the last three types of power can achieve much.
4. Jenny Joseph’s poem, “Warning,” is available at [www.poemhunter.com/poem/warning](http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/warning) (accessed March 12, 2010).
5. Dylan Thomas’ poem can be found at [www.poemhunter.com/poem/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night](http://www.poemhunter.com/poem/do-not-go-gentle-into-that-good-night) (accessed March 12, 2010).