

On being officially old

Published: January 13, 2026, 2:37 am

I am 66 years old this morning, and so am officially an old age pensioner.

So too is my twin brother, with whom, rather unsurprisingly, I have always shared a birthday.

I have never thought any previous birthday, at least since those when I was 18 or 21, to have any great significance. Those round number birthdays that other people seem to think of consequence I let pass by. In that case, I have pondered on why this particular birthday has been one that I have prepared myself for over a number of months now.

The reality is that this birthday is not numerically significant. After all, for much of my working life, I presumed that I would reach official old age on my 65th birthday, and the fact that it has happened a year later is, at least for me, given that I enjoy good health, a matter of relatively little significance. The fact that I do, however, now have a status as an officially old person does appear to be of consequence.

All of life is understood through the stories that we tell ourselves. Our understanding of who we are, how we fit in, how we relate, and what we identify as all depend upon the narratives that we tell ourselves, and which others will tolerate. The last point is of particular significance to those who are concerned with the equality, as I am, but we should not ignore those stories that we tell ourselves.

I now have society's permission to treat myself as old. I can say that I am retired, and so not work, without anyone expressing surprise about that choice.

I could spend my time on a golf course, or cruising, or by simply sitting in a café watching the day go by before filling in the relentless void in the rest of my day with endless television, and nobody would suggest that I was wrong to do so.

They would say something very different if I was young and did those things. In that case, the difference in society's expectations is what really matter to me on this birthday.

The trouble is that I am not willing to think of myself as old. Or retired. Or as non-working. I am assisted in doing so by the previously-mentioned fortune of good health, although I do wish that my knees would not ache as much as they did when I got up this morning.

I am also assisted by having something to do. I am still employed. I still enjoy grant finance. I still have this blog to write. With regard to the last at least, I am hoping that this will not change for a long time to come. I can be, and usually am, at least as busily engaged in work now as I was forty years ago. I would not wish it any other way.

However, I am already sensing three things as a consequence. The first is confusion. Many people just do not seem to understand why I do not want to put my feet up and do nothing.

The second is bafflement. People presume I must have made no retirement provision and so have no choice but work. That's not true. I could retire, and no doubt one day will. I might also get no choice on the issue, so of course I have provided for the need to retire if that necessity arises. It's just that it has not.

Third, there is a sense of being abnormal. I am not planning to conform to societal expectations. Much as I enjoy my hobbies, and as much as I could do some volunteering, what I actually want to do is what I have done to date. You might call it work. I just call it what I have chosen to do. And I still want to choose to do it, but I already sense that I am going to have to increasingly explain that I actually enjoy working.

That, though, leads me to the obvious question as to why it is that so many people so obviously hated their work so much that they never want to do it again, although they did it for many years. I have always believed, to abuse a Noel Coward quotation, that work should be much more fun than fun. I have always made choices to achieve that goal as best as I have been able to do, usually reducing my earnings from those that were possible to achieve that goal. I have never regretted doing so.

Nor have I regretted that cost if it has let me be honest with myself as a result. To misquote George Bernard Shaw this time, I have never thought life is about finding yourself, but is instead about creating yourself. My work is what I have created, and I took the opportunity to do that. Why I should want to stop creating now I do not know.

What I do know is that a great deal of work does deny people such opportunity, and it does therefore squash wellbeing. Leaving such work behind does make sense. I get that. But why is it so hard for those who do fully retire to imagine that my work did not crush my spirit, meaning that I can willingly choose to still do it given that I still have the chance to do so?

Is it having that opportunity that makes me feel like a bit of an outsider now I am

officially old but still very much wanting to work? Or was it having that opportunity to work as I wanted that always created the schism between me and those of broadly similar age who already tell me how odd I am to want to carry on? I do not know. But I wish we could provide meaningful work for everyone that wants it. The world would be a much better place if we could. The chance to work on ways that increase the chance of that happening is another reason for keeping on working.