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My nephew, born in Germany and residing in Switzerland, recently sent a lengthy email. "I'm so stressed out," he wrote. "I have a good job, but I take on too many projects."

He also wrote, at fifty-two he feels he has no "right" to enjoy life. His outlook partly explains his workaholic lifestyle, which he inherited as a family tradition.

"I was taught to keep my nose to the grindstone," his grandmother—my dad's sister Anna—said to me once. She had lived through two world wars, the first of which took her mother after two years of illness when Anna was nine (my dad-to-be was twelve) while their father fought in the war and food was scarce. At seven Anna was cooking the midday meal for herself and her four older brothers. They were subsistence farmers hard hit by the war, by the great depression a decade later, by another war that followed.

"My mother worked all her life," my nephew's mother used to say. She is the cousin named after me. "We children took after her." Edith used to care for a succession of foster children. My nephew complained once, when he was small his mother never had time for him. "She was always busy with other people's kids." Now seventy-five, she cares for an elderly disabled woman who resides in her house. Like her mother, my cousin cannot imagine retiring. Judging by my nephew's email, her children adopted their mother's work ethic as she did her own mother's.

Even when your working life is full of stress, the transition to retirement is not an easy one. This is true even if you're counting the years, months, days until retirement. "You" who are

transitioning are the lucky ones; in this country, untold people cannot afford retirement, no matter how hard they work and how ardently they wish it.

In my life I've held a variety of jobs. For the ten years preceding retirement I was engaged in what's euphemistically referred to as "academic migrant labor." Finishing doctoral work while teaching, I got so stressed, I developed back problems my doctor said were psychosomatic. "You must walk for an hour and swim for an hour," he instructed. "Every day." I was lucky to be able to do that. I lived in Tennessee then, where 6 AM was a good time to walk even when it drizzled a warm rain. During lunch hour the institutions at which I taught offered swimming for faculty and I availed myself religiously. At that hour, the pool was practically empty—young faculty had no time to swim, what with family responsibilities on top of the workload (my children were grown, thank goodness), and older faculty were tenured, taking it easy without having to exercise.

"Academic migrant labor" happens when you're hired as lecturer, full-time if you are lucky, but forever uncertain that your one-year contract will be renewed. You are always on the lookout for a tenure-track position, which lures you to other universities and other states. What I could not have known as doctoral student: every one of the English Departments of the institutions into which I was hired had a dysfunctional or toxic culture that made it all but impossible to develop one's potential, so I moved on. And that was in the Humanities, where—you'd think—people are intelligent enough (and humane enough) to introduce productive change. But no, they were caught up in petty rivalries that tore at newcomers, pulling them in all directions. And, as I said, I was lucky to have a full-time teaching job, even though the courses assigned to lecturers are the labor-intensive ones. In California I knew PhDs who earned their

meager salaries as “freeway flyers”—they traveled between two or three institutions where they were accorded no office space. Their students were shortchanged also—they could secure no office hour where they might turn to a prof for help or encouragement.

Is my nephew’s life more laid back than the American life I have known? It’s a wash. I married in California, and my husband was as driven to succeed as my cousin and I, whose parents suffered through the chaos of wars. Darold grew up in a working-class environment in Indianapolis, where no one dreamed of a college career—plenty of jobs were to be had in automobile-related industries. The only reason he decided on college was that, when he was confined with polio to Children’s Hospital in Chicago, goofing around instead of paying attention to in-hospital schoolwork, a no-nonsense nurse pulled him up short. “You’ll never be able to use your body to earn a living,” she said. “Start using your brain!” He did—and became as compulsive about it as my cousin in Germany was about foster care. Not surprisingly, when I related to my adult children during a Zoom session what my nephew confided in his email, it struck a sympathetic chord in all three. They, too—often pressured by higher-ups—take on more projects than can be brought to a satisfying conclusion. Not having the option of walking and swimming I once had (albeit on a shoestring budget), they make themselves ill with workaday stress—and their children take after them.

Recently I had visitors in my home, a husband and wife who retired a couple of years ago. The woman had run her own business and her husband had worked for thirty years in road maintenance. I was dumbfounded when they confided they each had lost fifty pounds after retiring, by quitting alcohol and eating more healthful meals. They looked fit and healthy. It’s a

pity that maintaining one's health is not an option during the working lives of countless employees, who often subsist as I once did "on a shoestring."