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Marvin H. Berenson

INTERVIEW BY Marvin H. Berenson

It was a beautiful morning in Palos Verdes as I walked toward the outdoor table where Bob Geminder, his wife, Judy, and their shaggy, black, long-haired dog, Charlie, waited. Bob had suggested meeting for breakfast at one of his favorite restaurants. He rose and greeted me with a hardy handshake and an inviting smile. It's hard to describe exactly what drew me to Bob, but within minutes I felt he was an old friend. Perhaps it was his smile or warm, friendly manner.

Bob, a handsome, upbeat, young, 71 year-old man with a mass of wavy hair, was casually dressed in simple white shorts and a white polo shirt emblazoned with the emblem of the Children's Cancer Society. After we ordered breakfast he began to speak.

"I come out of the Holocaust," he said, as I watched the first evidence of grimness appear on his face. "Through a strange bit of luck I'm alive today. The Nazis herded 18,000 Jews from the village in Poland where I lived and marched us to the town's cemetery. Together with my mother and brother we were among the first to arrive there. When all the people were assembled the Germans systematically shot 12,000 people. I watched as they shoveled the bodies into a mass grave. Apparently at the last moment they spared the rest of us to be sent into slave labor. My father had previously died of a heart attack during the German Blitzkrieg of Poland prior to the land invasion. My grandfather had been executed on the street. The year was *1941*."

"For the next *four* years my mother, step-father, brother and I managed to escape the Germans. We escaped from slave labor camps and ghettos. At one time my brother and I hid under the skirts of my mother and another woman as we walked to freedom. Often we had nothing to eat. My mother would find ways to steal or beg for food. I was always hungry and always afraid. Harrowing escapes and a hundred lucky breaks kept us alive until we were finally liberated by the Russians and sent to a US camp in West Germany, where they fed and cared for us. We finally left for the USA in 1947."

Arriving in Pittsburgh, Bob quickly learned English and became an outstanding student and leader. After graduating he matriculated at the Carnegie Mellon University leading to a degree in

Engineering. An illustrious career in Management, Marketing and Engineering Consultation for the Commercial Product Industry, Aerospace Industry and the Government followed. Among his accomplishments was the patenting of a Pile Driving System using an Electronic Hydraulic Actuator.

Bob has been president of every organization he has ever joined. Among them he has presided as International President of the Institute of Environmental Science and Technology (IEST). Bob added that his interest in becoming president of various organizations had started with becoming president of his college fraternity.

During the last five years of his engineering career he began to reflect on what else he'd like to do after leaving his profession. At this juncture he made it clear to me that the idea of retiring never appealed to him and is not part of his personal vocabulary. Rather, he spent those years considering how to transition into another career or activity and quickly focused on teaching.

"Many years ago," he said, "I frequently thought of my survival as a Holocaust victim. I realized that young children were growing up in a world where the news and memories of the Holocaust were slowly disappearing. I was determined to make certain that they would know there was a Holocaust."

"Over the years I have spoken about the Holocaust to thousands of middle and high school children. I thoroughly enjoyed the interaction with them and learned that many had never met a survivor before. When I began to reflect on another career I knew that teaching was my new calling."

Two years ago, in 2004, Bob applied to the Torrance Unified School District for a teaching position. He simultaneously started a two year program at Loyola Marymount University to obtain his teaching credential and began to teach math and science to *seventh* and *eight* grade students. He is currently teaching fulltime.

"I love teaching. Friends are puzzled why I would devote myself to such a difficult and time consuming profession at this stage of my life. I admit that the work is hard, much harder than my work as an engineer. But I never measure my activity by the difficulty in doing it, but rather in the

purpose and satisfaction I gain and what I'm able to give others. It's difficult to describe how much pleasure I derive from knowing that I'm an important part in guiding children to prepare for the times when they will be adults."

As soon as Bob obtains his teaching credential he hopes to switch to high school and work with 16 and 17 year old students. "Although working with younger students is very satisfying I'm aware they are not yet involved with making major decisions about their future. Whereas high school students are approaching that period and need proper guidance. I feel I can make my greatest impact with them."

There was no doubt that Bob Geminder loves and is stimulated by teaching. Listening to his words and watching his face as he talked about young students absorbing new ideas and how he felt drawn to them, certainly made it clear that Bob had found a new highly fulfilling career.

Bob is a man who values activity and purposeful living, evident in his wish to remain continually occupied with satisfying and stimulating work. As he said, "even now I'm beginning to wonder what I might want to do in five years when I believe my career in teaching might end." Although nothing yet has taken the place of teaching he knows that another transition will await him. Again he emphasized that retiring is not for him.

Even as Bob described his life I became increasingly curious about the ideas and attitudes that governed his existence. Did engaging in a fulltime work schedule and continuing his frequent lecturing fully satisfy him? Were there other areas and activities in his life that helped nurture him? What was his relation to his family? What conscious decisions fostered the satisfactions of this period of his life?

Bob speaks lovingly of Judy and his three children. His two daughters, ages 42 and 40 are unmarried but live full and happy lives. His youngest, a son of 36, was recently married. He is also very close to his 50 year-old niece whom Judy and he raised from the age of 16 and who has been an integral part of the family for the past 34 years. Bob stressed that Judy and he actively maintain close family ties and participate in numerous activities together.

"Does religion play an important part in your family life?" I asked.

"Not in the usual sense that religions often play within families." Bob responded. "I don't consider

myself religious since I don't believe in God. How could I after what happened in Germany? However, I'm very Jewish and my kids believe in God. I'm fully committed to Israel and am a definite cultural Jew. I actively support Israel and their beliefs."

Judy added that I should be aware that Bob had spent many years as President of his synagogue.

"So, despite not being religious, you're active in religious ceremonies and ritual," I commented.

"Yes. I see no contradiction in participating in religion while not believing in God. Perhaps I should have said that I'm religious with that one limitation."

"In that sense do you see yourself as spiritual?" I asked.

"No, not at all. I see spirituality tied to God and thus being spiritual is not part of my thinking."

"If you look at the broader perspective of spirituality involving such areas as love, connection with nature, or caring for the homeless, wouldn't you consider that in those ways you are a spiritual person?"

"No, I don't see myself as a spiritual person," ended that discussion.

"What about your other interests?" I asked.

"I contribute a lot to various charities and maintain one very important activity, that you might call a hobby. When I was about 21, I started a family tree and began to seek out other people with the name Geminder, which I've continued to do. Since it's an unusual name it wasn't hard to find them. I have since discovered over 200 Geminders and many are related to me and to each other. In Israel, I found my closest relative, my father's brother. My uncle was astonished at finding me alive having assumed that all other members of his family had perished in the Holocaust.

"I discovered other relatives in many countries, including *Chile, Israel, Brazil, Germany and America*. I brought many people together who never knew of the existence of their relatives. When I started it was not easy to gather these names and maintain communication. Today, however, we have email and the Internet so the search has become easier."

"Finding all those members of your family is no mean feat," I said admiringly. "But also maintaining communication with them must take up an inordinate amount of time."

"That may be true," Bob rejoined, "but I enjoy meeting new people and talking to them more than

almost anything I do. It's not only Geminders that I reach out to. It's everybody.

"I find that everyone is interesting and has things to teach me and to share. I talk to the homeless, people of all ages, and all levels of education. I just like people.

"Life, in general, absorbs me. In addition to people, I love nature and enjoy connecting to it. My major form of exercise is taking a daily walk on the beach with Judy. We love to watch the waves and birds. We feel nurtured by this part of our world."

Since I believe that feeling spiritual adds to one life I couldn't help but believe that Bob was spiritual in the broader sense of the word despite not accepting the concept.

I decided to pursue this a bit further in a somewhat different context.

"Bob, do you enjoy periods of solitude and aloneness for reflection and meditation?" I asked.

"No, not in the least. Solitude to me means loss. It's what would happen if something happened to Judy. Even then I wouldn't be alone since I have three children, lots of family and many friends. I don't ever expect to want or have solitude in my life. It would be like being in jail."

Judy broke in and added, "I differ from Bob in this regard. Solitude is a kind of poetic separateness that I occasionally desire. I do enjoy being alone at times, walking in a meadow or forest."

"Does this difference create any problem between you?" I asked Judy.

Bob smiled at his wife and then answered. "None whatsoever. All our interests don't have to be identical."

It had become quite clear that Judy and Bob were very compatible and most activities and interests were shared, but not necessarily all. Their individuality was still important to them.

"Does the fear of death play a part in thinking of the future?" I now asked.

"No," Bob replied. "However, I wouldn't want to remain alive if I couldn't smell the roses. At the point that my mind goes I'd rather be dead."

"People who wait until their mind has gone generally let fate decide when they die," I said, implying that death under those circumstances would come without his conscious awareness.

"I understand that. It would be difficult planning to die if I weren't conscious. However," he said jokingly, "a friend and I have arranged to do each other in if we both stopped smelling the roses."

I laughed at the absurdity and humor behind his comment. "Now that would be a great feat," I said jokingly. "Two old men without memory or consciousness conceiving ways to reciprocate doing themselves in."

"Just an ill-conceived fantasy," he laughed. "My friend and I still joke about it and imagine all sorts of ways we could do it to each other. I think it's one of our ways to make light of dying. Anyway, I'm no way ready to die. I have several important projects that I'm now undertaking that I definitely want to complete before dying.

"I'm involved with someone who is writing a book about my life during the Holocaust. Also another person is preparing a 45 minute video of my life. These are important projects for me to complete."

Again I was impressed with these new activities that would engage Bob for several years even as he continued teaching and remaining engaged in his multifaceted life. Behind his humor, Bob was letting providence play its part in deciding when he would die. He made it quite clear that as long as he knew what was going on he wanted to be alive.

Bob's enthusiasm about life brought up the subject of maintaining good health. He had had a heart attack at the age of 60 and prostate cancer that required radiation at the age of 65. He knew serious illness and lived with the possibility of death. He did not need any encouragement to live as healthfully as possible. "I don't eat bread with butter and I avoid French fries. I eat little meat and try not to gain weight." It was clear in our further discussion that a healthy diet was taken for granted by Bob and Judy.

Although he said nothing about activities directed to maintaining his mental alertness, teaching young adolescents will certainly keep his mind sharp and vigorous.

"Bob, if you had to summarize your advice to my readers about entering what we usually consider our period of retirement what would it be?"

"That's easy," he quickly responded. "Whenever the subject of retirement comes up, I would say 'whatever you do—don't.'" No one should retire. Period. If you're forced into retirement there are many things you can do to occupy yourself, even go behind the counter at McDonalds or to a hospital and help out. Work with the homeless.

“My basic advice is do something, anything but remain active. If you know when you’re retiring and have the option then set up a program where you can reduce your work time slowly. In the spare time you have opened up, begin to experiment with new activities and learn how to handle the shift from ending one job and doing something brand new. Look at the coming period as one of pleasure, excitement and learning as you transition into something new. It will revitalize your life. It’s a way of remaining young forever.”

I smiled as I thought of how pertinent his advice was. I followed up with another question. “Bob, what is behind the good feeling you have about life, the feeling behind your joy and sense of humor?”

For just a few moments he paused to reflect before he finally said, “The bottom line, besides my personality is, I like people. I like being around them. Anyone. And I love talking to them.”

“You should know how quickly people respond to Bob,” Judy interrupted. “People feel very close to Bob almost immediately and trust him and become friends. Bob, tell Marv about how you officiated at (need first name of person) wedding last year.”

Bob smiled as he began. “Well, that was certainly one of the highlights of my life. I was asked by my daughter-in-law’s sister to officiate at her wedding. I was overwhelmed that she would ask me since I didn’t really know her that well. I only knew her four years and her husband a year. Why they selected me is beyond my understanding. But it was an honor I’ll never forget.

“I also didn’t realize I could legally do it. I asked my rabbi who said I could. I learned that the state, actually the county, gives you a certificate to do it. It’s legal. Anybody can do it. The permit is for one day if agreed by all participants. I did it all on the Internet.

“The wedding took place in Tahoe and went well— no blunders or mistakes. I presided over a *non sectarian* ceremony.”

What a wonderful thing for people to do, I thought. Being able to officiate at the wedding of a friend should certainly appeal to others. Bob later told me that 36 states permit this one time commission. And there’s also nothing that prevents individuals from repeating it with other couples at future times.

As the interview with Bob Geminder came to an end I reflected on his way of life and how it could

stimulate others to find new solutions to their own existence. Eliminating the word retirement from our vocabulary is a worthy one, but not apt to occur. However, nothing prevents us from modifying it to mean that period in our life when we make a transition to something new, something special, something wonderful. It would be a time when older people make transitions to a different world.

Whether someone takes up a new profession as Bob did or prefers playing golf five days a week makes little difference. The issue is to establish a way of life that’s even more meaningful and fulfilling than our previous life. As I’ve stated on other occasions the second half of our life can be our most exciting and rewarding period. It’s in our attitude and beliefs that determine what we do with it. Bob’s words ring true, “Remain active. Always do something meaningful, but above all else be active.”

Later after the formal interview had ended and we were discussing possible titles for my new book, Bob quickly suggested one that eventually became the title that I used. It was *Retire with a question mark. Retire? The subtitle would be Don’t or Never.*

That is Bob’s true message to all of us. It is one we should all heed and follow.