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Shakespeare and the 7 stages of my retirement

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Marcel Strigberger.

On my first day of practice, I bought a leather armchair that I fully intended to use forever. Retirement was something that happened to senior partners, disgruntled lawyers or cranky old judges. Years later, I realized Shakespeare had already mapped it out.

As he notes in *As You Like It*: “All the world’s a stage. And all the men and women merely players. They have their exits and their entrances. And one man in his time plays many parts. His acts being seven ages.”

I recently celebrated my ninth year of retirement after my 40-plus years of a Toronto-based litigation practice, and I can say we lawyers do not simply retire. We move through acts or stages. I identified the following:

Stage 1

Day one. My main concern in my solo practice was securing clients. I did not actually think of retirement per se. After all, it was well before the invention of pickleball.

At least I had some leisure time on my hands to devote to my passion of writing humor, publishing same in legal and nonlegal sources.

For now I was planning for forever.

Stage 2

The second stage was a few months later, when I won my first criminal case, a break and enter. It helped that the prosecution's key witness did not attend in court. My career criminal client, Rick, was grateful. He even gave me a fine leather briefcase as a token of appreciation. (I did not ask where or how he got it.) He noted, "You're a genius. Don't ever retire." I responded, "Not a chance." I intended to practice until my armchair wore out. Or Rick did.

Stage 3

Over the next couple of decades, I hit Stage 3. Too much on my plate. I did a fair amount of family law, attracting bizarre characters. One client's husband was into voodoo. She told me that Leslie did not like me much, and that he was hexing me. This did not rattle me too much but for the fact that Leslie unexpectedly showed up at my office one day and dropped off a shoebox.

After he left, my receptionist Martha opened it under my direction (from a distance, of course). The shoebox was actually empty. I was a bit shaken, as I had watched *The Godfather* a while earlier. I was relieved that the box did not contain a dead fish.

It was around my early 50s that my blood pressure started talking to me.

During a lunch meeting, I chatted with my mentor, Hank, in his 70s and already retired, and he mentioned the “R” word to me, asking me what my thoughts were generally.

I told him retirement was not on the horizon at all, as I actually enjoyed practice, generally, but for the fact that I had to endure little annoyances, such as occasional unsympathetic juries, running urgent motions to restrain parents from absconding with their children, and overdemanding clients who thought I was a magician whose name was not Marcel but Merlin.

While on a cruise once, I received an urgent call aboard ship from my assistant advising that a client had been arrested for exposing himself on the subway, and he insisted on me dealing with it, as I had once told him, “Call me anytime.”

I graciously declined the retainer. I also told her to tell the guy not to show up at the office. I recall asking myself, “Do I need this”? Shakespeare’s Stage 4 character came to mind: “Then a soldier, ... seeking the bubble reputation even in the cannon’s mouth.”

I started to envy Hank. Somewhere between voodoo dolls and collect calls to cruise ships, the word “enough” began whispering.

Stage 4

Stage 4 hit in my 60s, when my hair turned salt-and-peppery (heavier on the salt). A common question I was asked was, “Are you retired yet? This was usually followed up with, “So when do you plan to retire?” This latter question really means, “When are you exiting the stage?”

I called Hank with a view of getting some sage advice. I could not reach him, however, as he was on a lengthy cruise. (Things seem to happen when lawyers are on cruises.) I felt I was getting there.

Stage 5

The fifth stage for me was in my late 60s, when instant communications became the norm. Clients and lawyers actually expected me to communicate with them by email. This did not bode well for a

technophobe like me. I was of the view that after the creation of Gutenberg printing press, the greatest invention was the sticky note.

I had reached Shakespeare's "justice" stage, rounder in the middle and full of opinions.

I was experiencing what I called the Sunday-evening blues. I would say to myself, "Monday is only hours away. What's waiting for me at the office tomorrow?" Eventually, these blues visited me Saturday. And then Friday, when they decided to unpack.

I called Hank again to chat. I caught him just as he was about to depart on a river cruise on the Danube. We discussed options, and I admitted I would just as soon spend my time as an author. He commented, "Question asked and answered." We both agreed that law is a noble profession, but there comes a time to exit that stage. I began to suspect that retirement was simply an extended maritime cruise. My big issue now was how to break the news.

Stage 6

This got me to Stage 6, the announcement. I did not want to shock my able assistant, Angela. How do I tell her? I thought of Shakespeare's line in *Hamlet*, namely, "Brevity is the soul of wit."

I told her straight-out I was retiring shortly. In her kindness and wisdom, she noted that she had been observing me for the last while, and she read the verdict on my face.

We compiled an exit checklist, concluding with the final move set for Jan. 31.

Stage 7

Moving day. As the movers were loading the truck, one of the men asked me a legal question about his marriage woes.

I thought about it for a minute and realized I was still allowed to provide legal services until midnight. I felt like Cinderella: I must leave the office at the stroke of midnight at which time my law practice turns into a pumpkin.

A thought crossed my mind. If asked tomorrow, how do I refer to my professional status? Do I say I am a lawyer? A former lawyer? A lawyer emeritus? I still have not figured this one out.

I have little doubt we all experience stages of retirement, albeit differently. In my case, I clearly identified with Shakespeare's proposition. And now that I have reached the final stage, as the bard would say, I am here sans weird clients, sans cranky judges and, in my case, sans pickleball.

No regrets, however, regarding career choice or retirement. And I do still daily enjoy my chair.

Marcel Strigberger, after 40-plus years of practicing civil litigation in the Toronto area, closed his law office and decided to continue his humor writing and speaking passions. His latest book is First, Let's Kill the Lawyer Jokes: An Attorney's Irreverent Serious Look at the Legal Universe (https://www.amazon.com/dp/B0DFHJGX1R?ref=cm_sw_r_cp_ud_dp_JNBV4X3RA8XVQ845YECR&ref_=cm_sw_r_cp_ud_dp_JNBV4X3RA8XVQ845YECR&social_share=cm_sw_r_cp_ud_dp_JNBV4X3RA8XVQ845YECR&starsLeft=1). Visit MarcelsHumour.com, and follow him at [@MarcelsHumour](https://twitter.com/MarcelsHumour) on X, formerly known as Twitter.

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