

The Void

By Paul Voakes

Katie almost didn't see him – the gent in the polo shirt and khakis striding out of the coffee house with a to-go cup.

“That you, Mike?” she called to him. “It's me, Katie. Katie Higgins. You and Debbie used to live around the corner from Rich and me, on Maple, remember?”

“Well, son of a gun,” Mike replied slowly as he did a frantic “Katie Higgins” search through his brain. “How are ya, Katie? Yeh, yeh -- we had some fun parties and CU tailgates back then, didn't we? So, what are you up to these days?”

“Oh, this 'n' that. Retired now for four years – still can't believe it. How 'bout you?”

“Two years for me,” Mike said. “Still getting used to, y'know, doing nothing.”

“Nothing, huh? Hmm. . . . Hey, got a minute? Pull up a chair, sit yourself down.”

Reluctantly, Mike settled opposite Katie at the tiny table where Katie had her laptop open with, she explained, her Spanish homework.

“What? Spanish?” Mike said. “Why?”

“When I first retired, I got paranoid my brain would start to, I dunno, atrophy or something. Then Rich and I looked at our bucket list for travel – Spain, Cuba, Costa Rica, Chile, Argentina, and I thought, how much more fun will those trips be if I can say more than ‘hola’ and ‘gracias?’ So here I am, officially at the intermediate level, with this online program.”

“Bucket list for travel?” Mike snorted. “No thanks! I spent so much time on business trips I'd be happy never to set foot in an airport again.”

“So, talk to me. Describe to me the Mike Caldwell version of the retired life.”

“Not much to describe, really. After a career like mine, this is the void. There I was, high-tech executive with a wall full of innovation awards, and suddenly I'm strapping on the golden parachute. Here's me, one of the world's true gurus on AZCO systems, and what happens? Virtually the entire industry pivots to OZMO. I always thought I'd phase slowly into retirement by managing a few projects, y'know, part-time, then consulting . . . but now this world-class skill set of mine is basically irrelevant.”

“I hear that,” Katie commiserated. “It took me a full year to let that go, after hearing once too often the ol' ‘Hey, Katie, you're the best, thanks for the offer, but you know, we got this.’ Yeh,

right. But that's when I started to see other parts of my life that gradually started mattering just as much as the career did. For starters, like being a decent wife, and mom, and now, nana."

"Yeh, that's great," Mike said, looking across the room. "Debbie and I both worked 50-, 60-hour weeks for at least four decades – good thing *we* never had kids – and when we finally retired we realized we couldn't stand each other. The divorce went through last April. She moved to Monterey, and I'm in one of those fancy new condos downtown. I thought splitting up would finally create my happy retirement, but no"

"OK, Mike," Katie ventured, "Now you've really got these little grey cells churning up here. Care to indulge me in a thought experiment?"

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Mike glanced at his watch, racking his brain for an excuse to leave. He also conceded that Katie had been a generous, outgoing friend when they were younger -- and conceded too that he was a little curious about this "thought experiment."

"All right," he said, "show me what you mean. But just sayin,' I've got a hard stop in half an hour."

"Deal," she said, her right knee bouncing with excitement. "So one of my Little Old Lady Side Gigs is to volunteer at the Senior Center, and because of my teaching background I'm doing little 'show and tells' about research on aging. A few months ago they had me looking into recent work on the psychology of retirement. You sound like the ideal candidate for what's being called 'Identity Bridging.'"

"OK, I'll bite. What is it?"

"They've discovered that the more your sense of identity is bound up in your work, the more likely you are to struggle, you know, psychologically, with retirement. It makes sense. For some guys, for decades it's been 'You are what you do at work.' Because of your tech success, your identity was spectacular. At the same time, it was, well, one-dimensional. Take away that all-encompassing career and, maybe, you feel left with not much. You said it yourself: a void. You're not *actually* doing nothing. Maybe you're not doing anything that feels meaningful."

"Yeh, but that's just who I am. I'm 68 years old. I'm not going to reinvent myself now."

"This is where this Identity Bridging comes in," Katie replied, her eyes now blinking -- intensely, and often, yet sporadically. "The research shows that happier retirees have a number of different sort-of 'sub-identities,' and they've created mental bridges to connect these, and move easily among them."

“So, multiple personalities?” Mike laughed. “Uh, no thanks.”

“C’mon, stay with me. One personality, with different dimensions. And you don’t reinvent yourself. You just rediscover some sub-identities you may have lost track of, or even create a new one or two. Let’s start with an obvious one. You were an expert in something you said went obsolete. But let’s step back from the tech details. Why were you so successful for four decades, through all those waves of tech innovations?”

“Well, I guess because I understand how innovation is hatched, and how it gets spread to different sectors.”

“There we go! It sounds like a much broader skill set than you’re giving yourself credit for. Thousands of businesses out there are desperate to learn how to manage innovation. Plus, have you had any experience in, oh, say, personnel management? Running meetings? Budgeting?”

“Uh, yeh,” Mike snorts, “only 45 years’ worth.”

“Right – all skills young entrepreneurs are eager to master. You have a wealth of experience to offer.”

“Oh, no. No, no, no. I can’t start up a business at my age. I’d have to sink all my nest egg into venture capital, and if I fail, I’m holding up a cardboard sign at that intersection out there.”

“Mike, we’re not talking about taking financial risks here. There are dozens of non-profit networks hooking up retired business execs with young companies in search of guidance. It’s called volunteer work – what a concept, huh? Now, I’ll go out on a limb here and guess that you’re not hurting financially.”

“No, you’re right. It’s funny: I spent years and years meeting an advisor for quote, ‘retirement planning,’ which was all about tax dodges and investments. It never occurred to me I could have been planning for my *actual life* in retirement.”

“Yep, and it’s not too late. So let’s explore the other identities you can bridge with, besides business guru.”

“Well, that’s where your whole theory collapses. Besides business guru? There’s no there there.”

“No there there?” Katie asked, her eyes still blinking hard. “You’d be surprised. Think about your life before that ‘AZCO’ took it over. What were the extracurriculars, from college, high school, even grade school, that brought you joy?”

“OK, let’s see . . . In high school I was a math nerd, and about as athletic as a cactus. Don’t laugh now, but I spent three years playing trumpet in the marching band. Actually, that’s . . . that’s . . . bringing back some fond memories. But no -- I haven’t touched a horn in nearly 50 years.”

“Ever heard of muscle memory? If you started taking lessons now as a raw beginner, yeh, swallow some pride, just to get your chops back, you might be surprised at how fast it all comes back. That’s what happened with me and my high school Spanish. And once you get playing again, think of the musical landscape! Not knocking John Philip Sousa, but . . . aren’t there other types of music, that you could never play in the marching band?”

“Well, I’ve always liked the rock and blues that has horn sections. But at this age I’d never get good enough to play in a band.”

“Mike, you don’t know that. And even if you never join a band, think of the fun you’ll have rockin’ out in your spare room — trumpet karaoke! With all windows closed of course. So, we’re making progress: something recent, something old. How about something new?

“Jeez, this is starting to feel like therapy or something. How did you get to be such an expert on this Identity Bridging thing?”

“Well, you know . . . lots of women get an early start at it. Over my adult life I’ve played chef, house cleaner, interior decorator, gardener, chauffeur, fashionista, mom, wife, and oh yeh -- fulltime educator. So a multidimensional retirement does kind of come naturally.”

“OK, I get it, I played workaholic and little else. So, something new, huh? I’ve always wanted to see if I could do creative writing, and I —”

“Oh geez!” Katie broke in, smiling, “look at the time. I *cannot* be late for water-color class.” For the first time, Mike noticed that Katie’s right knee hadn’t stopped bobbing.

“Wow, Katie, you’re kind of a poster child for this — “

“Oh hey, today’s my easy day,” Katie said as she packed up her laptop. “Tomorrow, I start with Pilates class, then it’s on to my book club, then in the afternoon it’s my online Spanish class before I serve meals at the community kitchen, and then evening rehearsal with a community choir. Yeh, staying busy like this is what keeps me sane!” As she gathered her purse and shoulder bag, Mike noticed that her nails were chewed halfway to the cuticles.

“Well, Katie, I gotta say, I’m stunned at how helpful this little talk has been today. I’m actually kind of excited. You’ve given me so much to th—”

But by now Katie had put on her coat and was barging out the door. Half out of surprise, half out of curiosity, Mike rose and walked to the coffee house’s front window.

He watched as Katie dove into her car and, three seconds later, jerked it into reverse. She didn’t see the two willowy young women in sweats and slippers, sauntering down the parking lot lane

behind Katie's car. As they suddenly jumped back, one of them screamed, causing Katie to slam on her brakes, barely avoiding impact.

"Watch it, grammaw!" one of them yelled, "You're gonna lose your license!" They resumed their amble toward the coffee house, shaking their heads and chuckling.

Katie put the car in park, took a deep breath, shuddered, and rested her forehead on the steering wheel. She took two more deep breaths, then didn't move for 20 seconds. When she lifted her head, she peeked back at the coffee house.

There was Mike, standing at the window. And for five seconds, they held each other's gaze.

"Yeh," Mike whispered to himself, "given me so much to think about."