

The Just Word Podcast

Transcript of Episode 9 – Retirement – Heaven or Hell – Mike Drak

Pat Bolland

Mike Drak was a banker for four decades until he wasn't. Now he writes about retirement, publishing Victory Lap Retirement and Retirement Heaven or Hell. The focus is not on the plan, but on the approach and he joins me now.

Pat Bolland 00:00

Mike, retirement was kind of foisted upon you. But you had a long time in the financial space? Were you not ready?

Mike Drak 00:09

To be honest, I wasn't Pat. I never really thought about it. I thought, you know, it's something that automatically happened at some point in your life. And for, you know, where I work, you know, people normally retired around age 63. So, I never really thought about it. I just, I was just working and being busy with things. And so, at that age 59, when was thrust upon me, I had a lot of problems with it.

Pat Bolland 00:35

Yeah, you know, what's interesting, as I read through your book ... books, I only partially did the first one. But the second one I read, cover to cover, I really enjoyed it. And it kind of reminded me a little bit about Elisabeth Kubler-Ross, and those kind of five stages of grief: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, acceptance. Did you go through any of that?

Mike Drak 00:58

I went through them all. Basically, it's it's basically the same thing is when you encounter and experience retirement shock. When I received the severance check, I was the happiest guy in the world. I thought I hit the lottery. And I was planning on leaving the bank anyways, because the stress was getting to me and I didn't like some of the things they were doing. And some of the people I didn't enjoy working with anymore, either. So, I wanted to leave. But you know, that following Monday, when I found myself alone, at home, I work, my wife was still working. So she had gotten the word. And I was just sitting there on the couch, and, you know, quickly losing my mind. Because I missed the telephone calls, I missed this and layer pings from the emails coming in, I missed the action. And I was just sitting there and I didn't know what to do at all.

Pat Bolland 01:53

You know, it's interesting, you talked about the in the book, the three stages, if you will, and as you say, the honeymoon was getting that check. And then it moved into shock and hell, and you wandered amongst your neighbors: window guy, the weed woman, the RV-man, you must have been really lost?

Mike Drak 02:15

Well, I was I was struggling with it. So, I would go out for walks in the morning just to give myself a break from thinking about things. And I would notice these people, you know, like weed guy, he'd be sitting outside, pulling weeds all day, all by himself. He didn't seem to have any friends. He didn't seem to have any source of purpose other than that, and I saw that same thing play out with other people. Like there was one neighbor that, he would wash windows all day long and I kept saying, you know, why is he doing that? Like almost every second day was washing windows and then one day I caught him washing his lawnmower and snowblower, and I said, well this guy, he's having problems.

Pat Bolland 03:00

So, Mike, you talk about different styles of retirement and you referenced comfort and growth. What what exactly are those? Because immediately I was thinking of people that are takers from society and people that are givers to society. But am I wrong in that interpretation?

Mike Drak 03:17

Well, I think it's very important to understand that not all retirees are the same. You know, some retirees will have different values and needs and wants in retirement, it is very important to understand that. And so, you know, when you look at comfort-oriented retirees, those are the ones that probably their biggest goal in life was to reach the retirement finish line. And now that they're there, all they want to do is rest and take it easy and stay in their comfort zones, they don't like change of any kind. And they just want to enjoy a safe, predictable retirement and live a simple life. And there's nothing wrong with that. But for people like me, and I'm a growth-oriented retiree, I will find that very boring. And it would really, you know, start to drive me a little bit crazy, because I need something more fulfilling and meaningful in my life. I need to stretch and keep learning and being challenged and keep experiencing different things, or I'm not going to be happy in retirement if I deny those needs that I have.

Pat Bolland 04:20

Okay, so then you came up with the nine principles. But before we get to the nine principles, tell me about your experience at the George River. I don't even know where that is. So tell me where it is. And then what happened to you.

Mike Drak 04:34

The George River is way, way, way up north, north of the tree line. And when I went there, I was suffering from retirement shock. And a friend of mine talked me into going up there and I went up there and I was just blown away because you're in the middle of the wilderness. Nothing works up there. So no, no iPhones, no computers, TV, nothing. You're just there in the wilderness in a little log cabin, and it's just you and the river and the fish and that's it. When it gets dark., you go to bed. A when it's light up, you get up and you go fishing for the whole day. And that's when I that's really where I found my cure for the retirement shock.

Mike Drak 05:24

God's country. And that's where I started to do my deep thinking. And I was thinking about life and how I was feeling and all the struggles I was going through. And I came up with solutions that would work for me. So it cured me of retirement shock. It got me back on my feet again, I started feeling positive, about things. And then I started searching for the things that would, you know, make my retirement meaningful and fulfilling. So thank God for the George.

Pat Bolland 05:53

Yeah. And then you came up with those nine principles, and they start with people and relationships. But when you're fishing, you're just you, isn't it?

Mike Drak 06:03

That's right. That's right. But you see, that's where you step back, and you start thinking about things. And you start thinking about what's important. And you start thinking about what you need to do to improve your life, improve your retirement, and you know, just be happy. And that's where I started putting the things together to say, these are the things that are important. These are the things I need in my retirement. And I have to make sure that I maintain these, and that I nurture them, because that's what drives my happiness. And so, you know, I started thinking about that. And what's interesting, Pat, is that once I designed the principles for myself, I started noticing what effect the pandemic was having on us and people throughout the world. And some of the retirement lessons that pandemic taught us matched up well against the principles. So I felt that I was on to something that was important, right?

Pat Bolland 07:03

Okay, so then it was people and relationships, health, exercise, diet, mental health, as well ... that's all part of it. And those ones are pretty apparent. Finances, obviously, you got to have some money around and as we've talked in the past about government supports that are out there. But here's the ones where I think it gets interesting. Adventure, spirituality, tribe, time-management, all those kinds of things seem different than when I've heard from my financial plan in the past, for instance,

Mike Drak 07:36

Yeah, and those are the ones I felt I needed to drill down into. Because really, you know, you're changing your life when you transition into retirement. And when I was working in the corporation, it was I was totally in survivorship mode, right? I wanted to maintain that job, I didn't want to lose it. And so I had to outperform, and I had to, you know, do whatever was required, so I could provide security to my family. And so you play safe, you play safe for 40 years, Pat. But then, when you get your freedom back, right, that's when you step up to the plate again, say, hey, I want to get out of survivorship mode. And I want to get back to adventure mode. Like when I was a kid, when I wasn't scared to try new things. And I wasn't scared about failing. And I wasn't scared that some boss was watching me see what I was doing. I wasn't scared about performance reports anymore of all that stuff. What I wanted to do was get out there, act like a kid again. You'll start thinking like a beginner again, and trying all these different things. Because How are you ever going to know if you love something? If you don't try it? Right?

Pat Bolland 08:54

So did you make like a bucket list?

Mike Drak 08:57

No, not not a bucket list. But I made that list of the principles. And then I drill down deeply in each principle. So like, for example, for the adventure principle, since retiring, I've written two books. I've become a blogger. I've become a public speaker, and a retirement coach. And I've never done any of those things before. Which is interesting, right? Because they're all new to me. And that's when I talk about the beginner's mindset. And now I signed up to do an ironman in Cozumel when I turned 68 because, just because I can. And when I'm finished that, I'm going to go to Australia, see my son. He's a doctor in Australia. We're going to get in a shark cage and go take a picture of a great white up close. So that's me in adventure mode, and it's so exciting to do it and I can't wait the pandemics gone. We can start traveling again and doing all these things because that's what makes life exciting for growth-oriented people like me

Pat Bolland 10:04

You know, my case, I was going through the book, I found all kinds of neat quotes - they're kind of interspersed all over the place - And here's what I like, "Although no one can go back and make a brand new start. Anyone can start from now, to make a brand new ending" from Laurie Bard. One thing that I didn't, and you went into from there, purpose, did you ever find a purpose in your life?

Mike Drak 10:27

It took a while. But I, I managed to come up with several purposes, to be honest, right. And a big thing for me is finding a way to give back to other people. And that held true in the bank too, because I love servicing my clients and trying to help them out, grow their businesses and things like that. And in retirement, I needed to find another way of doing that. And I found out I could do that by helping people get through retirement transition, because I know how difficult it can be, being through it myself and failing at retirement, and, you know, I saw my father, he suffered from retirement shock for about a year. And I had a good friend die from it. So I knew it was very serious. And not a lot of people talk about it, especially in the advisory business, a lot of investment advisors, you know, don't touch upon that subject. And it's so important. All these non-financial challenges that people will be facing as they transition to retirement. It can be the best time of your life, or it could be the worst, but you need to be prepared for it.

Pat Bolland 11:30

Well, you also talking about retirement rebels, which I thought was a nice kind of term, people that are authentic, I guess, is one word you use. Proud but egoless. And generally positive. It's mindset that counts isn't it?

Mike Drak 11:46

It is. And you know, it's interesting, because I've never noticed these people before retirement rebels. And I'm bumping into them all the time now. And I'm seeing some of the amazing things these people are doing, like a 100-year old woman celebrating her birthday by going skydiving for the first

time. Like how awesome is that? But we can see, we're led to believe that no, you know, when you hit 65, you're supposed to take it easy and play safe and not get hurt. And now I'm seeing all these people doing these things. I'm seeing people do ironman at age 80+. I'm seeing people go back to school and getting the degree they never finished when they were younger, at age 90. Like, it's just amazing. These people are traveling the world. They're running marathons, and they're doing all kinds of neat things. And they're posting on social media about all their adventures. And that's what gets me excited.

Pat Bolland 12:48

Yeah, except that all those things you're talking about take money. Do people have enough money?

Mike Drak 12:54

And that's the big question. And that's why you really have to sit down and say, okay, have an understanding of exactly how much retirement cash flow you have, and how much your retirement lifestyle is going to cost you. That's very important to figure out. And that's what I work with clients, you know, figuring that out. You know, I sit down with them, I say, 'Tell me your vision for retirement'. And I always laugh because I get that deer-in-the-headlight look back, it makes me laugh, because I could never articulate what my vision for retirement looked like, I had no idea. So what I do is, I give them copies of my book, and I say go and read this and come back, and we'll start talking. And when they come back, that's when they're all full of ideas. And, you know, they have all these things that they're thinking about. And then we sit down. And we actually draw out a couple scenarios, I like to end up with three, of yeah, this is what I want my retirement lifestyle to look like. And then we test them out. And we see you know, which one would be the best fit for them. And then once we have that nailed down, you know, and this is where we're saying, Okay, what does a perfect retirement day look like? What does a good month look like? What does a good year look like? And once we nail that down, we actually cost it out. Dollar for dollar. And so we take the guesswork out of it. Then we go back to the investment advisor and say, here, for example, I need 80,000 after tax to make this dream come true for me. Do I have enough and then the advisor's happy because they have a number to work with. So they go and crunch the numbers and they come back and you know many times they'll say you'll have, you have enough. And then the clients so happy because for the first time in their lives, they know they have enough so they're not worrying about 'Wait, maybe I need a little bit more'. They know they can afford that lifestyle they dream about, And instead of wasting time, you know, they're looking forward to the day when they can retire, and they can hit the ground running because they know exactly what they want to do. So it's it's a real big game changer. But you have to know your numbers, but you have to be able to match to something, right?

Pat Bolland 16:03

Yeah, and towards the end of the book, I found it very fascinating, close to home too, you talk about the concept of creating a movie of your life. What's the message there?

Mike Drak 16:17

Well it's like that quote too, what we do is we look back at the movie that's already been developed for two thirds of our life, you know, what did we do? Did we live a great life? Or could we do better? What can we improve upon? What mistakes did we make? Because right now, we're in our second life. And

now we're saying, okay, I want to have a good ending to my second life, what adjustments do I need to me. And this is when we get back to being our authentic selves. Not like that person. I was like in the banking world. Now I'm acting like myself, and I'm doing the things that I want. I'm doing the things that give me personal satisfaction, and we want to get on that track. But unfortunately, a lot of people lose touch with themselves over the years, when you're working, you're so busy, and you're raising a family and you're working so many hours, you lose touch. And what we want to do is get back in touch, start on following the right path again, for ourselves, and do all those things that make us happy and give us personal satisfaction. But we can still do that because we have a shot, right?

Pat Bolland 17:19

Yeah. Mike you touched on it earlier, and throughout the book, you intersperse additional comments regarding the pandemic, for instance. What is the most important lesson that you've learned from the pandemic,

Mike Drak 17:39

I learned the value of family, of being able to have a loving family around you, and being able to see them on a regular basis. That's so important. And another thing I learned is how boring retirement could be when you have too much time on your hands. And you don't know what you're going to do with that time. And I don't want to spend my days picking weeds or washing windows, like some of my neighbors did. So that's so important. And we could feel it and experience it during the pandemic. And then, you know, finding purpose. If you couldn't work from home during the pandemic, there wasn't much to do other than try to survive and maybe take the dog out for another walk around the block. And that's where a lot of people woke up to, hey maybe working is not such a bad thing. Maybe that's what I need in my life. But maybe I don't need it to be as stressful as it was before. Maybe working part time would give me that personal satisfaction that I'm missing. And that's where people are starting to look at it. And they're starting to say, hey, wait, maybe this retirement, the old way of retiring, doesn't work for me anymore. I need to change things up. So yeah, it's very interesting.

Pat Bolland 18:55

I just want to finish up Mike with George Harrison. Remember George Harrison of The Beatles, saying "Heaven and hell is right now. You make it heaven or you make it hell, by your actions". Are you in heaven now Mike?

Mike Drak 19:11

I am, thank God, Pat. Thank God, but it took me a while to get here. But I am, I can honestly say that. And I'll tell you one last thing. Having a great retirement is all about attitude. If you think retirements gonna suck, well, guess what, it will. But if you think it's gonna be the best time of your life, and you can dream about all the possibilities that lay ahead of you. Retirement's just going to be wonderful. So you got to have a good attitude and you got to have good solid retirement beliefs.

Pat Bolland 19:48

Mike, wise advice. Thank you ever so much.

Mike Drak 19:52

Thank you, Pat is a pleasure.

Pat Bolland 19:55

Mike Drak, author of Retirement Heaven or Hell?