

Emeritus in a Flash

by Daniel Kleppner



ome years ago I published a polemic admonishing a fictitious colleague, “Professor X,” for refusing to retire¹. Instead, Professor X pursued research until the day he died in his laboratory at the age of 95, leaving instructions that he was to be interred along with his equipment and his graduate students. Rather than allow death to interfere, Professor X planned to continue his research posthumously. This struck me as inappropriate and I set myself the task of setting him right.

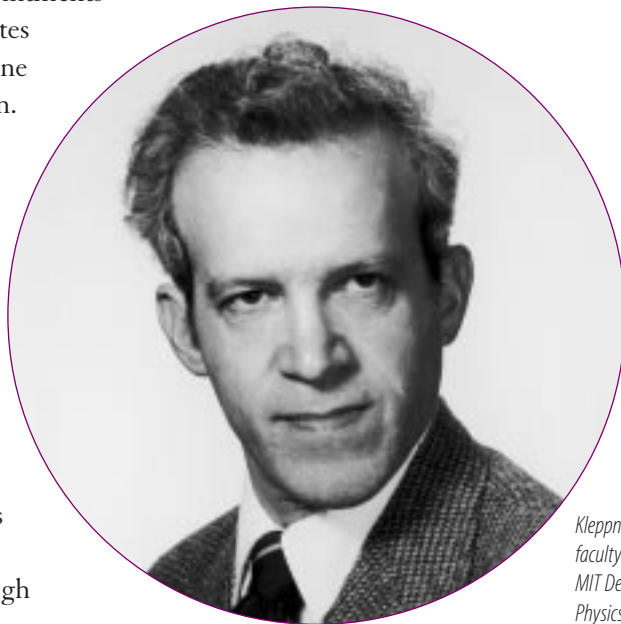
SUCH AN AWKWARD INCIDENT COULD NOT HAVE OCCURRED if it were not for the Age Discrimination in Employment Act of 1983, which permits academics to work into their dotage and beyond. This Act mandates that workers be evaluated on the basis of performance, not age; as long as one can do the job, one can have the job. The reasoning is unexceptionable but it rests on the premise that job performance is regularly reviewed. Tenured faculty positions, however, are not regularly reviewed. On the contrary, the ultimate value of tenure is that it assures academic freedom—the freedom to pursue one’s own goals regardless of the opinions of colleagues or administrators—a freedom that is incompatible with performance review.

By neglecting to recognize that tenured positions are essentially exempt from performance review, the Age Discrimination Act left the decision on when to retire to the discretion of each professor. For physicists like Professor X the decision is simple: never stop! Nevertheless, I argued to him that professors should retire at a reasonable age and for “reasonable” I suggested the mandatory retirement age when the Age Discrimination Act was passed: 70 years.

Because retirement is generally regarded as a delicate subject, I went to some length to explain to Professor X why retiring at a reasonable age is a Good Idea. First, the issue raised above: Tenured positions are specially privileged and retiring at a reasonable age is a reasonable price to pay for such a privilege. Second, if the university we cherish is to flourish, it is essential that we make room for younger faculty. Third, universities such as MIT with generous pensions that automatically start paying out at age 70 have provided for one’s income; to draw a salary in addition smacks of double dipping. Finally, retirement does not mean halting one’s intellectual life. Many physics departments make retirement as attractive as possible by sustaining emeritus professors’ memberships in the academic community, providing office space, permitting research to continue, and generally treating emeritus professors like other members of the faculty.

Unless the Age Discrimination Act is amended, which seems unlikely, retirement will continue to remain a personal decision. In spite of my arguments for retiring, however, there could be reasons for retaining one’s faculty position to a ripe age. New appointments might be limited by lack of qualified candidates rather than lack of positions. In such a case, one could hardly be accused of blocking a position. Also, aging professors can play many different roles in a physics department. As things stand, it is up to each member to decide how well he or she is playing that role.

At the time that I published my polemic against Professor X, I realized that I was making a public commitment to retire at the age of seventy, about five years in the future. What I failed to realize, however, was that those five years would pass in a flash. Almost before I knew it, my 70th birthday arrived. So, last July, for sound though lamentable reasons, I retired.



Kleppner as a junior faculty member in the MIT Department of Physics, circa 1968.



Kleppner (far left) in white tie and tails at the 2001 Nobel Prize ceremony, a guest of Laureate and MIT colleague Wolfgang Ketterle (second from right). With them are MIT CUA colleagues David Pritchard (second from left) and Tom Greytak (far right).

Now retired for almost a year, I can offer first impressions of what might be called life on the other side. Halting a career of teaching upon retirement is somewhat like halting a career of parenting upon a child's departure from home: one mourns the transition but enjoys the relief from responsibility. Aside from having to drum up a suitable response to the friendly but irksome question, "What's it like to be retired?" the only act that causes me discomfort is appending "Emeritus" to my title. "Emeritus" carries connotations of discharged, discarded, perhaps even defunct, but I have discovered that one does not casually shake off the MIT habit of busyness. Like most of my colleagues, I am swept along in a stream of activity. In collaboration with Tom Greytak,² I pursue research on an MIT specialty—ultracold hydrogen—in an area that is in the midst of a revolution. In the MIT-Harvard Center for Ultracold Atoms (CUA), I have a front row seat on some of the most exciting advances in physics today. Some long overdue writing waits to be written just as soon as I have thought the thoughts that need thinking, but because of worldly distractions—at the moment a road show on missile defense from an American Physical Society study that I co-chaired—my idealized life of tranquility and scholarship remains elusive.

Retirement is ultimately a touchy matter not because of one's professional situation, but because of one's situation in life. Retirement is—with possibly the exception of a golden wedding anniversary—one's final milestone. Retirement forces one to confront the ultimate personal issue—mortality. For this, I turn to the final words of William Saroyan, which are reported to have been, "I know that everyone has to die, but in my case I thought there might be an exception." Pending a decision on such an exception, there is much to be said for setting out on a career as Professor Emeritus at MIT.

ENDNOTES

1. “Nibbling the Bullet,” *Physics Today*, June, 1998, p.11.
2. Professor of Physics and Associate Department Head for Education.

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