

## **Open Mic Recap: October 20, 2010**

### **Positive Retirement Conversations: The Sequel**

**Overview:** The October 20 Open Mic demonstrated that when you ask a question, you never truly know where it will lead. I began this OM hour by asking “What questions do you use to discuss retirement with clients?” Participants shared some great questions, which led to several amazing and unpredicted turns in the road: a planner asked how to elicit a client’s passions on the eve of the client’s retirement (how’s *that* for a challenge?); another participant (a retired planner) told us her own poignant and courageous story of having ‘crashed and burned’ upon retiring without a plan, and having taken some years to regain her balance and build a rich and rewarding life in retirement; and a third (our “token 30-year old planner”) asked us a great question ... and wound up answering it himself. A rich hour; read the details here.

### **Recap**

**What do you ask?** I asked “What questions do you use to discuss retirement with clients?” and here’s where it went:

- One planner noted that her clients in the 55+ age group aren’t thinking about retirement in traditional ways – if at all. For example, one client has no plans to retire, as his work as a lighting designer is a key part of his life. Indeed, for such clients, “retiring” might be counter-productive, depriving them of rich sources of reward and gratification.
- Another said that he doesn’t have specific ‘retirement conversations.’ Instead, he asks all clients, “What do you want your life to look like now, and in the future?” This allows clients to explore their desired lives, and navigate the critical trade-offs between consumption-now and consumption-later. “My clients aren’t interested in talking about ‘what I want to do when I retire.’ They are more interested in talking about ‘what I want to do next.’” Fascinating – and consistent with the idea that people seek out a financial planner when they are experiencing a significant change in life circumstances, and need help with the financial (and non-financial) aspects of transition. That’s what “next” is about, isn’t it?

***Drawing out a client’s passions:*** A third planner chimed in, noting that until recently he’d “focused on the numbers” with his clients -- and knows there is much more to the planning conversation and relationship. He cited a client who’s about to retire and who has no evident passions. “How do I draw out this client’s passions?” Several planners shared what they have experienced as useful questions for eliciting conversation about ‘what really matters’ (aka: “passions”):

- (a) One noted that a colleague had asked her an intriguing question recently: “What did you enjoy most on your last vacation?”
- (b) Another said that he finds that “the three questions” created by George Kinder ([www.kinderinstitute.com](http://www.kinderinstitute.com)) are very useful in stimulating a client’s imagination about how they would live their lives if money (and the time and effort entailed in earning it) were not an issue. (See the **ADDENDUM** at the end of this **Recap** for the three Kinder questions. **Note:** **Please** don’t use these questions with clients until you have answered them yourself,

about your own life. A useful rule of thumb is to never ask a client to “go” where you haven’t ventured yourself. Male o.b.-gyn’s, of course, would be an exception to this rule.)

- (c) A third caller cited a powerful question that Dan Sullivan ([www.strategiccoach.com/](http://www.strategiccoach.com/)) teaches; this planner phrased it as “Imagine it is three years from now and you are leading your ideal life. What would have had to happen in order to bring about this ideal life?”

The planner who asked how to draw out the passion thought these all were useful to consider. Another participant noted an interesting difference between the framing of the Kinder and Sullivan questions. George’s questions are *future-oriented*: “What would you do if money were not an issue?” (i.e., what *activities* would you engage in), while Dan’s are purposeful and *retrospective*: “What would you have done to bring about this life?” (i.e., how would you have *accomplished* this life?) He noted that both approaches are important, and I agree! We first need to richly imagine how we would ‘populate’ our ideal life: how it would look, feel, taste, etc. Without this image, we lack a ‘destination’ (to use a GPS analogy). We then have to take specific, ground-level action (create and follow the route map) to get there. As Lewis Carroll said, “*If you don’t know where you’re going, any road will get you there.*”

***Blindsided by her sudden retirement:*** Another OMer related a poignant story of having been blind-sided by her own retirement. Here’s a synopsis: “I was asking these questions to my clients, but I was totally unprepared for my own retirement. I thought I would never retire, that I would ‘go with my boots on.’ But then I had to retire, and I found I had nothing to do, no plans, no ideas! I went into a depression, and needed the help of a psychotherapist to help me dig my way out. I had never done any of this work on myself! I’m working with a financial planner, and just now snapping out it. The hardest thing for me was switching from a **saving** to a **spending mode!** My life had been wrapped up in financial planning; vacations were arranged around conferences, and clients became my friends. I found that I had to put a life together! And I did – but it’s come slowly. I think the ‘three years out’ question or George’s three questions are very important to ask clients. They would have made my own transition a lot easier, I can tell you.”

I asked her if there had been a turning point in her upturn. “It was when our financial planner urged us to just get on with it! Take the plunge, to go on that cruise, do the travel we really wanted to! We have the money we need; we have enough left to take care of our needs, and we don’t need a lot. People don’t need a million dollars, or five million. They need a plan!”

Her account, having touched many nerves and hearts, stimulated further discussion. One participant told of quitting a corporate job at age 48 in order to attend seminary; suddenly not having an income was an emotionally difficult and unanticipated change. “My own financial planner wasn’t tuned into the transition I was about to experience. I would have benefited from having a conversation about my values, needs and priorities, and the ‘money scripts’ materials of Kahler and Klontz would have been really powerful for me at the time.”

***What’s the planner’s responsibility?*** Another caller, self-described as “the token 30-year old planner in the group,” noted that his clients “retire *from* something, not *to* something,” and he wondered aloud if it would make sense to initiate retirement conversations with clients earlier, perhaps in their 40s and 50s. “I’ve met so many retirees who are miserable,” he added, “that maybe I’ve answered my own question.” (Don’t you just love it when that happens?) He then

asked whether, when a planner sees that a client's life is out of balance or they are headed for a difficult retirement, it's the planner's responsibility to call the client's attention to the situation. Several other planners jumped in to eagerly express that it is indeed the planner's role and responsibility. One phrased it in terms of "mitigating client risk", and another stated a simple criterion: "Is the client living the life they enjoy?"

I added my own two cents here, expressing my view that financial planners are serving the client's broader well-being, not just their financial health – and that I would love to see a discussion or debate about whether the role of the planner as 'fiduciary' extends beyond financial safety and health, to a fiduciary-like responsibility for the client's overall well-being. What's your view on this topic? Is my view reasonable? outlandish? or what? I hope you'll email me and let me know.

**Final Thought:** Those are the highlights of this vibrant, full, and provocative Open Mic hour. I hope it inspires you to **join us next Wednesday, November 17 at Noon eastern**, for an abundant conversation about...well, about Abundance. Who knows where that will take us?

**Open Mic Coming Attraction:**  
**Wednesday, November 17 at Noon eastern:**  
**Open Mic on 'Abundance', right in time for Thanksgiving.**  
**Call-in info: 1-213-289-5450, passcode 202779#.**

**ADDENDUM:**  
**The Three Questions (George Kinder)**

Here are the fabled "three questions", from a Get Rich Slowly blog about George Kinder (<http://www.getrichslowly.org/blog/2009/02/15/george-kinder-three-questions-about-life-planning/>). You can also see them, along with a discussion of their use, in George's books, *Seven Stages of Money Maturity*, and *Lighting the Torch* (co-authored with Susan Galvan). See [www.kinderinstitute.com](http://www.kinderinstitute.com) for more about the books, the questions, and more. Here are the Qs:

1. "Imagine you are financially secure, that you have enough money to take care of your needs, now and in the future. How would you live your life? Would you change anything? Let yourself go. Don't hold back on your dreams. Describe a life that is complete and richly yours. "
2. "Now imagine that you visit your doctor, who tells you that you have only 5-10 years to live. You won't ever feel sick, but you will have no notice of the moment of your death. What will you do in the time you have remaining? Will you change your life and how will you do it? (Note that this question does not assume unlimited funds.)"
3. "Finally, imagine that your doctor shocks you with the news that you only have 24 hours to live. Notice what feelings arise as you confront your very real mortality. Ask yourself: What did you miss? Who did you not get to be? What did you not get to do?"