

# The Killer Question Asked of Retirees— “So, What Do You Do?”

by Allan Milham

► For many, the “so, what do you do?” question can cause as much stress as receiving a certified letter from the IRS. As you near retirement (or if you’re recently retired), reflecting on your response to this one question can be a networking game-changer. Your goal is to feel empowered and confident when asked this question.

“So ... what do you do?” In America, this question opens conversations everywhere—from cocktail parties and neighborhood gatherings to neighboring seats on a jetliner. But it’s more than a conversation starter. By asking it, people size you up to determine whether your background and interests mesh with theirs. How you answer the question can help you forge new friendships, develop new business alliances, and build your network. Think of it as a high stakes game.

Warning: If your response isn’t compelling enough, you might stop the conversation before it gets started.

“  
What percentage of your identity is tied to your career, current or past?”  
”

For those of us who are retired or preparing to retire, the question “so, what do you do?” can elicit discomfort, even shame. It can put us face to face with our uncertainties and tap into our deepest fears. Do we know where we are headed?

For many, our work defines us. It’s a source of pride, and it gives us purpose. It provides us with community and a compelling reason

to get up in the morning. And for better or worse, it’s the way others assess our value. But how do we best respond to this question at this new phase in life when many default to speaking of past roles and achievements?

The solution is to focus on your future. With the right support, you can build a life in retirement that’s productive and fulfilling. Then, when someone asks you what you do, you can respond with a compelling new narrative. Here’s how to get started.

## Shifting from “what I did” to “who I am” today

When many on the cusp of retirement address “who they are” by identifying “what they did” in their careers, they still live in the past. It’s a cultural norm for Americans to place emphasis on their work as a way to define themselves. At social gatherings in the United States, the first question is normally “so, what do you do?” while in most European countries, most often the first question relates to “where are you or your family from?”

Changing the social narrative in America to focus on “who we are” versus “what we do or did” likely won’t shift anytime soon. However, to ensure your readiness when the question is asked, take the following four steps.

## 4 STEPS TO A COMPELLING NEW NARRATIVE

1

**Start with a reflective assessment of your third act of life.** What excites you about where you are in your journey in life? What do you find compelling? Engage in a reflective, introspective, appreciative look as you craft a new narrative about the excitement of where you are headed. How does your narrative speak to something bigger than you—a cause, a mission, a focus you want your legacy to be a part of? How can you entice your listeners to truly lean into your response?

2

**Script a powerful story that has you feeling confident and empowered when stating it.** Think back to when you have been moved by another's compelling response to the question "so, what do you do?" Most likely, it included a story versus a tagline-type recital of title and company. That narrative made you lean in with curiosity to learn more. What story can you incorporate into your response?

3

**Carefully craft your story with elements of what you feel passionate about doing.** Make sure the description reaches into the coming decades and allows listeners to hear an authentic, heart-centered, and compelling response that has them seeking to learn more.

4

**Take your new narrative for a test drive.** Much like the proverbial 30-second elevator pitch in sales, practicing your response will allow you to be at ease and speak with confidence when you're asked the "so, what do you do?" question.

Your third act of life can be your best act of life. Having a new narrative not only points you forward, but it can inspire people to want to learn more. It can also allow you to grow a new social network that can last for decades.

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