

Money

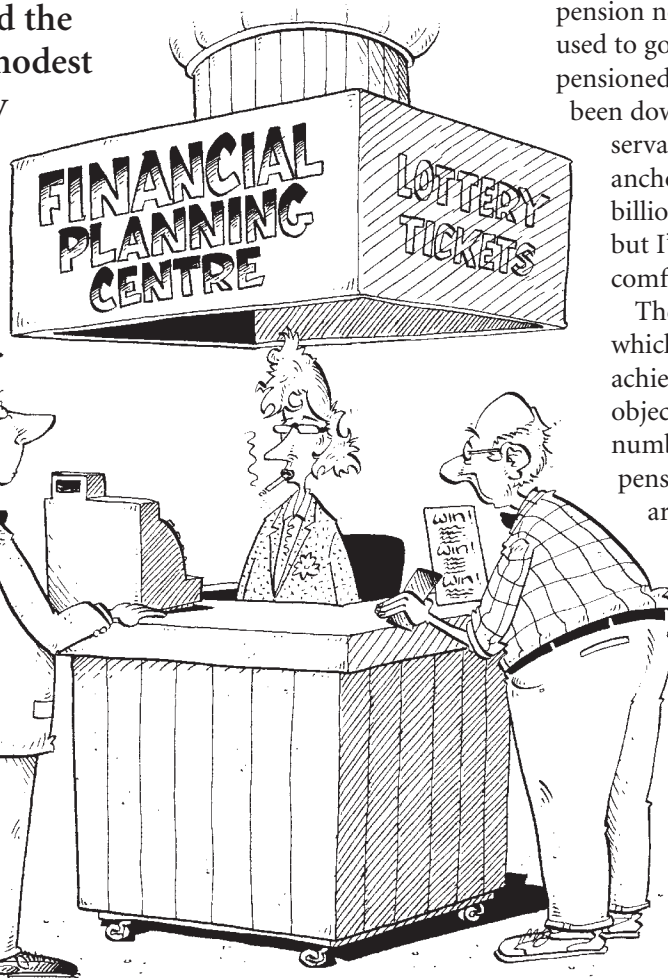
BY FRED STENSON

Now that we have passed the Millennium with only modest mayhem, I dare turn my thoughts to money.

All the financial advisors in the world agree on one thing: the boomer generation is woefully ill-prepared for retirement. The true woefulness of this ill-preparedness is the “fact” (a fact to the financial advice community at least) that the demographic ostrich egg of the baby boomers will choke the national pension snake in the act of trying to digest us.

With their helpful foresight weighing on my neck like an anvil, I try to get the old head up for a look ahead. Is that me at 70, lugging the old briefcase from office to office, trying to find a single living being for or with whom I once worked? Some corporate Ms. Havisham in a dim-lit cubby where cobwebs like hammocks stretch between comical artifacts: filing cabinets full of hard copy, an IBM Selectric, 3/4-inch video cassettes, and, lordy, lordy, I think that’s a book!

Failing that, is that me, shining faucets at 80 in a marble washroom as a 25-year-old with electronic implants and plastic pants waits



behind me with visible impatience? He is thinking what a pain government affirmative action for the old is, and he smiles an evil smile when he remembers that it won’t last much longer.

Stop, you’re frightening me.
I’m frightening me, too.

What you’re supposed to do when this kind of daymare besets you is take comfort in your company pension or your RSP portfolio. But who on earth is in line for a company

pension nowadays? The people who used to go smugly by, on their way to pensioned beach-bliss, have mostly been downsized by now. A few civil servants remain, their pensions anchored by several hundred billion dollars of federal debt, but I’m not sure that would comfort me.

Then there are the universities which for years have been achieving their cost-cutting objectives by multiplying the number of “sessionals”—un-pensioned, un-benefited scholar serfs who do all the teaching, except on days when their teeth hurt too bad. If the students are paying any attention at all, sessionals are a dire cautionary tale about what can happen to you if you get an education.

Well, what about RSPs then? That’s Retirement Savings Plan for those of you who are really screwed for life savings. It used to be Registered Retirement Savings Plan, but that gave some people the impression that the government stood behind the value of the paper they were all but bribing us to buy (holding a tax to our heads). A trust company that bit the dust a few years ago cleared that up nicely. The public cried foul and asked for change, and the government took “registered” out of “RRSP.” Who says government isn’t responsive?

Chances are you do have RSPs and I bet you check their progress in the market section of the newspaper at least every week. Chances also are that they are not mounting up as fast as you'd hoped. Sometimes, they mount down. When you buy them, you are bedazzled by an array of steeply climbing graphs, and you're told about Mr. and Ms. Smith who started buying their RSPs in the '60s, when they were five and seven. They always contributed the maximum allowable and they saw their investment multiply by a factor of a thousand. The Smiths now own Albania and have a right of first refusal on the City of Venice.

But then there's *your* RSP, whose graph looks more like the back of a briefly cresting whale. It blows mightily and then goes down again, sometimes very far down.

But of course, as any financial analyst worth his/her salt/pepper will tell you, that's because YOU DID IT ALL WRONG! You were either too cautious or too aggressive, and there wasn't enough variety in your port-

folio. Lack of portfolio variety is very bad. Bill Gates only has one thing in his, and he seems to do all right, but for you it's a disaster.

Financial advisors will tell you other handy things, such as that you should pay off your house.

"Honey, I've just figured it out. We should pay off the house, so I'm on my way to the bank to do that right now."

File that alongside "never take any money out of your RSP" even if you're starving and living on the street. Why? Because you could wind up living on the street later on, when you're less able to withstand the elements—unless of course you luck out and die young.

So what's to be done? Not that I expect to retire, but I do expect to maintain my interest in masticating and digesting food. I think I will retain my keenness for shelter. What can I do to ensure the continuation of these luxuries?

After much thought, I've decided to get rich. Toward that end I'm designing an electronic organizer

and address book that fits in one nostril. Another of my ideas is a project I call "The Interbrain." It's like Jung's collective unconscious, only more commercial. It will allow data transmission with a baloney sandwich power source and no externals. A few other ideas I have in development: a permanently installed fibre optic that will allow you to watch your food digest; a trivia game for those low in self-esteem which only asks you things you know; a genealogical software package that proves indisputably that you are descended from either Charles II, Jane Austen, Adam Smith or Sitting Bull. The latter comes with a special edition, slightly more expensive, which proves you are related to them all.

While I await patents and so on, I'm doing a few other things that should perk up my income. For example, I've discarded my name. Who knows how many six-figure advances it's cost me already? First of all, a million people cannot be found who will buy a 30-dollar book by someone named Fred. Second, it's better to come up with a new pen name for every book, since nowadays, people aren't very interested in buying a book by someone they know has written more than one. That kind of writer is not new. His cutting edge must have got dull. So if I invent a new name, and a new self, for every fiction book, I will likely prosper.

In nonfiction it's different. You're allowed to have written more than one book, because you're supposed to know stuff. So after I've made the big dough in fiction with my several first-time authors, I will publish a how-to-get-rich book by all of them. We'll go on the inspirational speaking circuit and make another bundle.

This is great. In the span of a slender wit column, I've put my financial worries to rest.

Fred Stenson has published eight books and has written over 130 films and videos.