

Becoming an Ex

Kent Redfearn, Ph.D. (Coach K)

One day, a close friend said, “If you don’t start your Ph.D. program soon, you won’t have time to use it.” I wondered: how do I exit an established role and begin an entirely new life trajectory as a student again? Will my sixty-year-old brain have what it takes to complete courses with brilliant thirty-year-old minds? As it turned out, I was the oldest person by far in every course except one. Without knowing the construct, I entered the process of role exit through the back door.

Helen Rose Fuchs Ebaugh left her life as a Catholic nun to embrace life as a wife, mom, and sociology professor. Her 1988 work, *Becoming an Ex: The Process of Role Exit*, is foundational in the study of purposeful role departure. Ebaugh (1988) defined role exit as “the process of disengagement from a role that is central to one’s self-identity and the re-establishment of an identity in a new role that takes into account one’s ex-role.” Based upon personal observation and interviews with 185 people who intentionally became an ex, Ebaugh identified four stages of becoming an ex.

Though the concept of stages is less rigid today than when she wrote in 1988, Ebaugh’s four stages are insightful. In my view, the four stages are most likely experienced concurrently rather than one leading to the next. First doubts, seeking alternatives, the turning point, and creating the ex-role are the process of role exit (Ebaugh, 1988). For me, the most challenging aspect of role exit was creating my ex-role.

My previous role was as a global senior pastor of a network of congregations. Relationships within the congregation, community, and network were deep and meaningful. How does one become an ex in a long-term pastoral relationship? Components of my previous role became decision points. For example, should I participate in weddings, funerals, infant dedications, and special celebrations? These questions were difficult for me because of role residual (Ebaugh, 1988). At the time, I hadn’t considered the aspects of my former identity that I would carry into my new identity, or the memories and associations others may have held of my previous identity. One friend said, “You aren’t a pastor any longer. Don’t use the name, Pastor Kent.” At the same time, some folks wondered, “Where is Pastor Kent?” Now, I know that role residual included what happened inside me as I left one identity and created a new identity, and what happened inside those who held a strong view of my previous identity. It was a difficult time, to say the least.

For years, I said I would not be in my current (at that time) role for the rest of my life. “My future includes earning a Ph.D. and serving in new roles,” I said. I had studied numerous disciplines and programs and decided to study performance psychology at Grand Canyon University. The board of directors of the organization I served fully backed my decision to continue my lifelong education dream. In that regard, we created a transition strategy that included my serving for 18 to 36 months. A series of situations made the turning point (stage three) clear and urgent. In the 18th month, midway through the Ph.D. process, I submitted my 2-week notice, left the congregation I had served for 40 years, and began a new role as founder of Second Curve Coaching.

Knowing myself and how I am wired, I knew a partial disengagement wouldn’t work well for me. I am an all-in or an all-out kind of person. My friends heard me say many, many times, “I am the world’s worst at saying goodbye. When it is time for me to move on down the trail, I will give my 2-week notice and be gone.” I did as I said I would do. I became an ex.

Intentionally becoming an ex involves a series of vital decisions that move you toward your preferred future. Purposefully becoming an ex requires overcoming the comfort of what is current (Samuelson & Zeckhauser, 1988) and the weightiness of what is left behind (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). Samuelson & Zeckhauser’s (1988) article title is insightful: *Status Quo Bias in Decision Making*. The Barna Group’s “State of the Church” (January 2026) findings were that 24% of U.S. Protestant senior pastors seriously considered leaving full-time ministry within the previous 12 months. Yet, senior pastor departures are uncommon (thankfully). Lifeway Research’s Pastor Attrition Study (2025) found that only 1.2% of pastors leave each year. Pastors have many reasons to stay, leave, or adjust their ministries. No one size fits all. Yet I wonder whether clergy sometimes have a status quo bias. Whether you are a pastor or not doesn’t alter the processes of role exit. Intentionally becoming an ex is a well-studied phenomenon.

How do we determine when we are at the turning point (stage 3)? In this blog, I am referring to those who intentionally initiate the process of becoming an ex. If your exit was chosen for you, the stages still apply, but the turning point came to you instead of from you. That’s a post for another Wednesday. *The Review of Economic Studies* published *Heads or Tails: The Impact of a Coin Toss on Major Life Decisions and Subsequent Happiness* (Levitt, 2021). The study’s findings surprised me. Individuals nudged by a coin toss to make significant life changes were more likely to make the change, reported higher satisfaction with their decision, and were happier six months after the study than the participants who were directed to keep life as usual.

Undoubtedly, Moses experienced role residual when he was both the son of Pharaoh’s daughter and God’s appointed leader to guide Israel out from under Pharaoh’s rule. Early

Christians must have experienced role residual when Saul of Tarsus, a huge persecutor of Christians, became a Christ follower himself. When considering his former roles, the Apostle Paul wrote, “Indeed, I count everything as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ and be found in him...” (Philippians 3:8–9, ESV). Role residual is real and something you will face as you navigate the stages of role exit.

My friend inspired me to activate a role exit turning point when he said, in essence, “If you don’t hurry, you will be too old to apply what you learn during a Ph.D. program.” Hopefully, this blog post will be a friendly nudge. Is there a role you need to leave to be and do what you have always dreamed of?

I will even help you flip the coin.

