

This opinion piece by Professor Tom Plate appeared in the Korea Times on September 4, 2014.

Three people who never give up



By Tom Plate

LOS ANGELES — Life can make for strange but true comparisons. Here are three public figures for whom I have great admiration. On the surface they have very little in common except that they just never give up, and if you put them in a room together they would almost surely hit it off famously. They are very outspoken, direct, and on the whole sure of themselves. And they are great company.

The first is the career comedienne and prominent TV show host Joan Rivers, 81. At this writing she was being treated in hospital after a serious heart attack. She had been in New York City to promote her new book (the aptly titled “Diary of a Mad Diva”), and then was scheduled to do a one-woman standup show at a nightclub in nearby New Jersey.

Remember, now, she is 81.

Her hit show “Fashion Police” is aired weekly. It rates celebrities’ fashion sense from a critical perspective, with all the reverence of a steak knife. The show is hilarious, assuming you can bear her notoriously bawdy excesses.

Retirement, whether via golf or seniors’ home, is not in her DNA. This is one diva who won’t stop singing, even after the orchestra has packed up and gone home for the evening.

The same set of fond observations can be applied to my favorite former CIA agent. He is Donald Gregg, now 86, who has all the slowdown of a second-stage intercontinental ballistic missile. His new book, “Pot Shards: Fragments of a Life

Lived in the CIA, the White House and the Two Koreas,” is one of the best reads you can buy. It is wise, romantic, blunt and sometimes even adoring, especially of his colleagues in the CIA who struggle against tough odds for what they believe to be just causes (as Gregg once did, when he heroically saved the late Korean leader and Nobel Peace Prize winner Kim Dae-jung from assassination); and colleagues in the U.S. Foreign Service, whose members surely number among the great unsung heroes on the American international scene.

You may also find his intimate insights and clear-headed evaluation of George H.W. Bush (Bush senior — the smarter one) extremely revealing. This great American leader probably is our most underrated former president. Don’s recollections almost give one hope that maybe the Republican Party some day can come up with another such gem.

Besides running around to promote his book, serving on the board of the Los Angeles-based Pacific Century Institute, and trying never to say no to any reasonable pro bono request, Donald Gregg is a living inspiration to me and some of my students, even at 86 — or perhaps precisely because of that 86 number.

The final figure in this triad of never-give-up types is Asia’s Lee Kuan Yew, now 90. The physical frailties of sheer age have degraded his physicality and mobility dramatically, but judging by recent essays and speeches the mind of this extraordinary and controversial man who helped create modern Singapore still cooks like an old master.

Once we chatted about the folly of retirement when he granted me a bunch of time at Istana, his country’s gorgeous government house, in summer 2009 for my book, “Conversations with Lee Kuan Yew,” part of the Giants of Asia series, published the next year. From a huge air-conditioned reception room we took leave and a welcome break from the formal conversations midway to walk outside in the scorching Singapore heat. He was 86, and even then could put much younger men to shame. I asked him why he didn’t just retire, relax, play a little golf, whatever.

I put it to him this way: “All this talk about your growing older. I’m growing older, unfortunately!”

“Everybody does.”

We then talk about aging gracefully: “I loved your recent speech on aging, by the way. You said, ‘Keep on working and don’t retire. I loved it, one of your best speeches.’”

“No, once you stop working you are done for.”

Aging gracefully means always staying useful. Life is for the living, so just keep on going until you are stopped. That's what three very different people I admire have been telling us. I, for one, intend to follow their counsel, down to the minute.

And not ever look back.

American journalist Tom Plate is Loyola Marymount University's Distinguished Scholar of Asian and Pacific Studies; his age is not generally known.