

Retirement: When having no plan becomes the plan

Pam Ryan

My husband Graeme and I had imagined a retirement of endless summers. With neither of us enjoying skiing, ice-skating or mountaineering our intention was to live seasonally, moving from one warm climate to the next. The year I finished working our plan was to holiday in Spain and Portugal and whatever other places took our fancy. It was not to be. Graeme was diagnosed with leukemia and so these became special, precious, final months dedicated to family and friends.

With no soul mate and no career in which to immerse myself, the question became what now? Truthfully though, I didn't even actually ask that question. It was really a matter of just doing 'stuff', whatever. Somehow that stuff turned into writing. I can't describe it as cathartic because there was no release. It was more occupation or distraction – just something to do with my mind.

I wrote in a kind of brain-dump of things I knew about, or thought I knew. Like most of us, my head was full of education-related theory, trivia and administrivia. So I shared my thoughts on leadership and on schools. What was liberating was, with no-one to answer to, I could say whatever I pleased. One book became two when I decided to explore what other practising leaders believed and thought. Two will become three when ACER publishes a book of workshop activities this year. Is there a plan? No, I'm just writing, but I've learned there is something to be said by those of us with our experience.

Other opportunities arose through the networks we all have and I became involved with a social research team, Incept Labs. The involvement took me to Malaysia where we're researching their ambitious education agenda. In Australia, the team is launching a research-based school change program in support of school leaders. Some of these associations have led this year to a role at the University of Technology Sydney, working with fabulous colleagues from Turrumurra High as they reimagine initial teacher education. I'm called an Industry Professor, meaning that my path to academe has been as a practitioner rather than a career academic. There has been no grand design – it's all just happened.

So why this rather personal vignette? It's just to share that, even if you have one, things don't necessarily go according to plan. Inevitably other things will emerge and most likely, because of the experience and skills we may not even know we have. The decision whether to take up those opportunities is individual. It doesn't change things or fill the void; it will be different for each of us. Certainly there's no moral to the story. It is what it is.

Contributor details

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Pam was Principal of Orange High School from 1992-2002, after which she spent eleven years as a Director – seven in NSW and four in international education in Hong Kong. Currently Pam divides her time between working part-time with UTS as Industry Professor (Learning and Education), with the social research team at Incept Labs, and on her doctoral studies. Pam has published three books on educational leadership.