

My perspective: Bliss is too small a word...

Judith M. Felton

"Bliss is too small a word..." is my usual response to enquiries about my retirement. Whilst I'm mindful that school leadership is a privilege and an opportunity to serve and effect positive change, several months into my retirement I am enjoying, and grateful for, each day. The luxury of time and the gift of choice are liberating and accompanied by an unfamiliar and very welcome freedom.

In the latter part of 2017, when my intention to retire was in the public domain, I was asked repeatedly about my plans. Invariably, and truthfully, I responded that my plan was to have no plan. This is not the path for everyone, but it has worked for me as my new life has unfolded with new possibilities and, wonderfully, the opportunity just 'to be'!

After decades of scrambling for time as I juggled my personal and family life (including raising three children) with fulfilling my professional responsibilities, I'm enjoying the simple as well as the significant moments of this stage of my life. I acknowledge that I'm a rookie retiree but simple things such as late and long mornings savouring a coffee whilst considering national and international events, taking a leisurely walk relishing the winter sunshine, reading or catching up with long neglected friends and extended family are simple and welcome pastimes. On the other hand, very recently, I've had the significant joy of extended travel with my husband, children and grandchildren as well as the celebration of my son's wedding in the US.

Preparing to leave my school

This 'no plan' approach contrasts markedly with my strategy for concluding my professional life. Like all principals, my investment in and passion for my school community were very well developed. Together with the relentless daily theatre with which one deals, often at a frenetic pace, I managed the effects of a major fire in 2000 and the school's threatened closure and dismantling in 2001-2 as well as the profound and protracted effects of this threatened closure upon the school community. Surviving threatened closure and rebuilding a school community in a very competitive and re-branded educational market is not an easy gig.

Perhaps because of this history and perhaps because of the person I am, I was committed to ensuring that the school was in a strong position when I concluded my principalship. This meant the development and ownership of strong and sustainable structures, systems and protocols and the establishment of a talented and passionate leadership team, with each member willing and able to work with the incoming principal to continue improvements for the school community.

To this end, several years before my retirement, I started succession planning. I 'cherry picked' from within and beyond the school community, sometimes young, always passionate and highly competent educators and provided them with capacity-building opportunities and positions as well as the mentoring and coaching needed to develop as school leaders. In my view, this capacity building and succession planning ensured that the school and its students were in 'good hands'; in the hands of school leaders who knew and valued the school's story and had a clear vision and commitment to its future.

Furthermore, I felt strongly about ensuring certainty for the school community, so I informed the Department of Education and my director of my intention to take leave prior to separation from the

department and relinquish my position as principal prior to separation. As this decision allowed the selection of a new principal, I concluded my time as principal at the end of January 2018 and the incoming principal commenced with the new school year.

To make this choice it's important that one has clarity about retirement. After 25 years as a deputy principal, relieving principal and principal in two very different schools including over 15 years as a substantive principal, I had this clarity. As much as I loved my school community and enjoyed working with and building the capacity of impressive colleagues and inspiring students, I was acutely aware that life is finite – for me, another life beckoned!

Despite judicious planning, I didn't anticipate all the implications of my last few months for the school community. My farewells were held amidst a very crowded term 4 calendar. Whilst no time in the school year is 'a walk in the park', term 4 has its challenges as one is hosting significant student celebrations, planning and staffing for the coming year, teachers are marking and reporting to parents and, from my experience and observation, people (students, staff and parents) are frayed – less resilient and resourceful – so one's time is occupied resolving conflict and managing crises. After my experience, term 2 is looking good to say farewell!

I guess my advice is to be prepared for the heightened emotional landscape as change affects people. It's not necessarily about the exiting principal's emotional state but the emotional landscape within the school. I had been the principal for a long time and for some, the only principal they had known. People were anxious about the unknown so there was a need for reassurance, for certainty and continuity. I acknowledged the school's achievements as well as staff, parent and student input in the realisation of these achievements. I invested considerable time building confidence that student wellbeing and student learning were constant educational priorities, speaking publicly and privately about being open to change and supportive of the incoming principal, inviting him to meet with the P&C and staff.

This takes time and it takes energy. By the end of the school year I was tired (very tired), so any outstanding matters were deferred until January. Consequently, January was occupied organising the principal's office, ensuring that documentation for on-going matters was concluded or easily accessible and various reports were written and communicated to the appropriate personnel.

Life in retirement

I have embarked on my new life seamlessly. Quite deliberately, I made the decision to separate both physically and emotionally. I don't yearn to keep pace with my previous school community. I don't 'hover' or trespass upon the new principal's territory. In my view this is unfair to the new principal, my ex-colleagues whom I value and me. I want and have another life.

Whilst I'm enjoying retirement and its accompanying anonymity, I don't feel I have lost my identity. I miss some wonderful colleagues whom I believe are the future of Public Education. I love to hear their news and learn of their endeavours – gatherings are boisterous and high-spirited occasions. Presently, I'm their mentor and occasional coach but, over time, this will change.

This phase of my life, a phase I am grateful to have reached with the health to enjoy, has no definitive shape. Currently there are, however, a few things that occupy me and give me joy. In no order, these include:

1. Health and fitness: For me this means the time and freedom to participate in weekly Pilates and the 'extreme sports' of walking and swimming. I enjoy walking solo, with my husband or with friends and

family and I enjoy its benefits. Now, if I miss a day or two, I certainly don't miss the next. It's part of my routine – in the hotter months I avoid the sun, in winter I seek the sun. Whilst I enjoyed a reasonable competence in swimming in my youth, in recent decades my time in the pool has been intermittent – very intermittent! Nevertheless, I continue to entertain the delicious delusion that the long-forgotten rhythm will assert itself and swimming will once again be a welcome therapy - a meditation.

2. Family and friendships: Time is a gift that is enabling me to strengthen relationships with extended family as well as friends. Whilst my extended family is in Australia, my children have built careers in disparate parts of the world. To maximise time with my children and grandchildren I travel and, when their work schedules allow, they holiday in Australia. NYC and London are predictable destinations, but how many Australians have discovered the beauty of Oman? Also, as I build my new life I'm nurturing old friendships and open to the possibility of new friendships.
3. Reading, writing and films: These have been the great joys of my life and now I have time to read, write and indulge my taste for films. Journal writing has become a habit as I reflect upon my transition to retirement as well as the emerging shape of this phase of my life. Writing for my children is important to me (and to them). As my parents died in their forties I haven't had the benefit of an oral history, of parents sharing their stories or anecdotes of my childhood. Most recently, I have witnessed my very young grandchildren's delight in stories of their parents' – my children's – youthful adventures. This has nudged me to write my story, my family's story and my children's story, knowing it will be savoured and, I hope, treasured.

Conclusion

This article has become more personal than I originally intended but I hope that it has outlined some aspects of my transition to retirement as well as the reasons for this approach. I hope it provides some optimism, even guidance, to those about to embark upon retirement.

At this very early stage of my retirement, I am 'catching my breath', on sabbatical, reflecting upon what was, what is and could be, as well as exploring, rediscovering and relishing pastimes, friendships and family that give me joy and fulfilment. This is possible because I can shape this new phase of my life.

The shape of one's retirement will vary according to one's values and what one values. And it's not set – this is me now! Wiser, more experienced retirees will have their views but, from my perspective, it's a case of watch this space as the adventure unfolds.

Contributor details

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