

The Journey is more important than the Destination

My journey is a circular one. Beginning as the only rural woman in my year to win a college scholarship to University Women's College, my university career was something of a roller-coaster ride. Coming from a country high school and finding learning came easily, I hadn't developed good study habits. Lectures were only checked by a final exam – no assignments, no university tutorials, simply prac. work and an unmarked weekly set of Physics problems to keep me on the straight and narrow. It was not that I let the big city go to my head and spent my time in riotous living, I simply didn't realise that I needed to be revising work constantly rather than just at the end of the year. I passed my year but lost my scholarship due to a lack of honours. By second year I'd learned a lot and did well enough to regain the scholarship and by third year, I finished third place in my class and was invited to be the college Physics tutor for the following year.

My four year career as a hospital physicist was deeply satisfying and I was able to gain an external master's degree using research I carried out while working at Peter Mac. I felt I was aiming at the top of the tree.

The next part of my journey took me to Indonesia and suddenly I was unemployed. However within a year I had both a job and a baby and priorities were tricky. Another year later, inflation had escalated and when the cost of a 500 gram tin of powdered milk reached 10% of my husband's government salary, we reluctantly decided to return to Australia.

And so here I was – a housewife in a rural town. I persuaded myself that this was what I wanted to be and found a choir to sing in.

The next country town provided three little boys and busy and happy years with four little ones. Another move, and three at school. With an extremely supportive husband, I threw myself into leading a Brownie pack.

Further up the Murray, everyone at school and the niggling question of why I was still at home. I

had no teaching qualifications, there were no other outlets for my specific field of work so I helped begin a 'Hello group' for young mums and newcomers to town. Then I joined the craft shop and made jam to sell. A friend and I wanted our children to know the joys of singing and making music so a children's music group (with waiting list!) followed and ran for fourteen years. I wrote a series of articles about faith in a rural setting for the Victorian Uniting Church newspaper. Frustrated with the children's cooking books the family was bringing home from the library, I wrote and published my own version. After listening to marvellous stories of the lives of elderly friends and knowing they hadn't been recorded, I wrote them up in a social history.

Still I wrestled with the idea that God had given me talents and I wasn't using them.

I decided to look outside the square. A youth worker job was advertised. I applied for it and when I heard I had been accepted, I suddenly got cold feet and asked for time to think about it. On the face of it, I was a 50 year-old, church-attending married woman whose only qualification was that she had four youth of her own – hardly the person who would appeal to the country drop-outs.

I said I'd give it a go for three months. The management committee encouraged me to try a project that would help our town's young people and we settled on assisting people to pass their L plate test and then to arrange a driving instructor to come out to our town to give some lessons before the learner had to face the trauma of city traffic. It was a real success with a number of adults joining the young people in the program.

I was hooked. The next six years included a very busy drop-in centre, open at weekends as well as working hours, young women's programs, speakers on self-esteem, parenting issues, drugs and alcohol, abseiling and canoeing expeditions, following-up of school leavers and much more. There were many joys and successes and also disillusionment and failures. I learned a lot.

A fence at the top of the hill is better than an ambulance at the bottom and I decided to do a parent education course. Parenting programs followed in a range of venues and much interesting interaction with hundreds of parents.

An opportunity was created to do some primary school Indonesian teaching. I tried my hand at this for a few years but found it difficult with very little available in the way of teaching resources. Surely there must be a better way. So our small school made a tape of fourteen Indonesian songs and several hundred copies were produced. Then a book was written and published to go with the tape and this covered a basic course for junior primary Indonesian teachers. This led to invitations to lead professional development days which I really enjoyed. Incidentally, literally thousands of Australian children are now singing songs from the tape, which has since been upgraded to a CD.

Mem Fox spoke on radio about the vocation of being a story-teller. I loved the concept. Story-telling was my thing. I asked to take several story-telling sessions at a couple of libraries. Then the wonderful Indonesian folk stories encouraged me to publish a book of these along with some Indonesian history.

Some years ago, our daughter, the wife of a country doctor, wrote an article for a medical journal imploring doctors and their wives not to think of a move to the country as a 'sacrifice'. I was touched by the fact that, after telling something of her own story, she wrote this:

"My mother was a nuclear physicist and followed my school-teacher father around small towns in Victoria. At times she had pangs of jealousy about her high-flying siblings but she greatly enjoyed her diverse jobs over the years. She has driven a baker's van, taken parenting courses, written the history of the town and still teaches Indonesian at many little rural schools."

Just because you live in the country, doesn't mean you have to limit your vision, and that belief underlies my passion for children learning the language and culture of another country. We saved and, over the years, travelled to Europe, returned to Indonesia and also visited Tonga.

And here am I, still singing, still teaching Indonesian, still sorting Op. Shop books, having loved four wonderful children and now ten equally wonderful grandchildren, looking back on the journey. It has led to a very different place than the well-known scientist I once envisaged. And the journey to this

wildly- other destination has enriched me beyond my most fanciful dreams.

I have learned that it is important to make opportunities. Don't wait for them to come to you. And don't be afraid to try something new.

The morning after I'd written this, I realised for the first time that, if I'd been born a man, it was likely that I would have spent my entire life in science and missed all of this. I mentioned this to my best-beloved and he said,

“But you might have won the Nobel prize!” (We think big in this house.)

I knew I could honestly say,

“It would be nothing compared with the richness of the life I've had. I wouldn't swap it for the world.”

The lives that have touched me and the lives that I have touched are the essence of the journey. The flowers along the way are the lovely times – the cup of coffee, the chat at book group; the flashing colours of the rosellas are those who just touch briefly and move on; the solid rocks are the reliable souls who have become long-time friends. And over all, a God who has been there for me.

I can enthusiastically endorse Tennyson's 'Ulysses' in one of my favourite passages of poetry:

“I am a part of all that I have met;

Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'

Gleams that untravelled world, whose margin fades

For ever and for ever when I move.

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,

To rust unburnished, not to shine in use!

As though to breathe were life.”