



## *Retirement for the Restless*

WORDS BEVERLEY STREATER

**W**hen I turned 60, my husband and I hosted a bunch of our dearest friends — to share delicious food, drink fine wine, and enjoy some nostalgic tunes in our backyard. The Gold Coast Autumn was kind to us that year, and the photos I have are a reminder of the great time that was had by all.

It also sticks in my mind as the time when our friends first started asking me if I was planning to retire. Retirement wasn't really something I had given a lot of thought to. I have never been much of a life planner, my preference being more for spontaneity and variety.

Fortunately my husband is of a similar ilk, which allowed for our fairly nomadic lifestyle during the first thirty years of our relationship.

Nev and I had met at Officers' Training School in Victoria, a year after I joined the RAAF. In the ensuing years, we moved from place to place, attracted by adventure and employment opportunities. We spent time across Victoria, in Mandurah (Western Australia), Darwin, Groote Eylandt, then back to the west, before finally settling in Queensland. On reflection however, it's clear that our constant change-of-address was for me, an escape from painful memories.

So, retirement? I didn't have many role models. I recall my mother retiring soon after her 60th birthday. Her retreat from a high-pressure professional career had bled into a yet more stressful alter-career, leaving her frustrated and entangled. It seemed she wasn't ready for the indolent life that some people associate with retirement, yet she had swapped paid stress for unpaid stress. Not an attractive option to me. I looked to my sister in law who had vacillated about retiring from her position in a school for students with disabilities. She had struggled with walking away from a job that brought her joy, purpose and fulfilment.

**I also reflected on a dear friend who had boldly announced she was in fact not retiring, but *resigning* from work in her mid-sixties. It was evident the women around me had struggled emotionally with the decision to leave work.**

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My husband and I reviewed the finances and it looked okay for me to leave work. But rather than jump straight into retirement, I decided on the try-before-you-buy model of reduced working days initially. My boss was supportive, even assisting in the recruitment of a person to cover the other days. Away we went — three days at work, two at home and all the free time one could ever need.

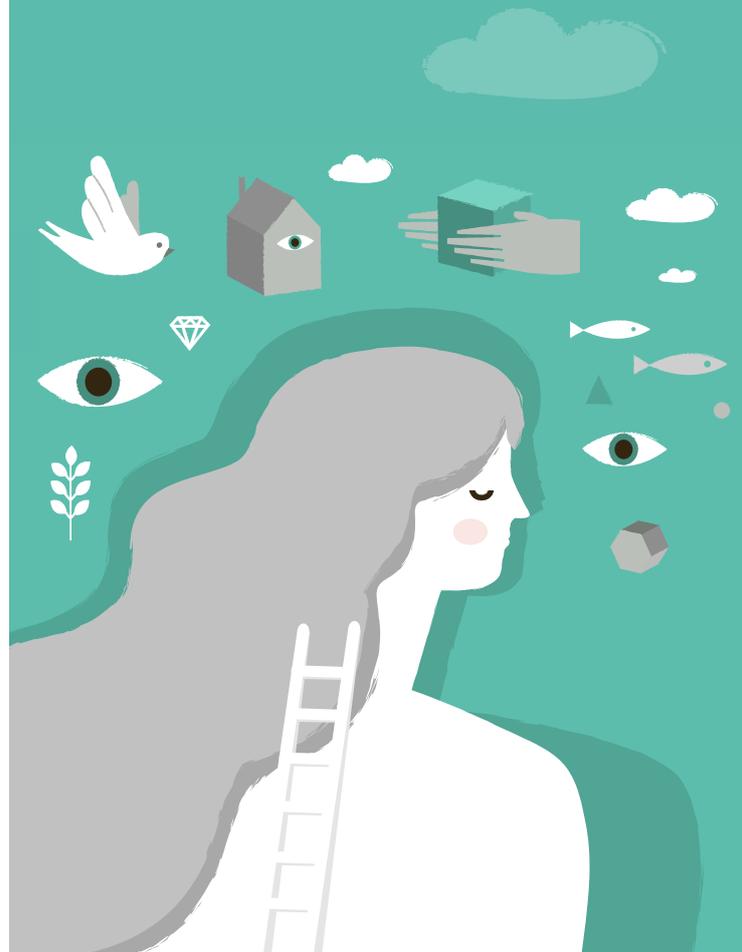
However, it wasn't all smooth sailing. I started to experience all sorts of uncomfortable feelings, and then became angry with myself for not having the *time of my life* I had envisioned. I was restless. I experienced pangs of guilt if I wasn't doing something productive. I felt anxious if I couldn't identify a constructive objective for my free time. I would curl up in the sun with a book, but my attention would easily wane and I wouldn't be able to recall what I had read.

A few months in, I was chatting to my doctor about this overwhelming malaise that had descended on me. I felt terribly lost. I knew that all this additional free time gave me the opportunity to do the things I felt I missed out on as a full time worker, but instead I just felt sadness. He then respectfully asked, 'do you think you should speak to someone?'

*And this is how I met my psychologist.*

**At our first meeting I felt a bit lame explaining why I had been referred. My inner monologue was telling me she had truly unwell people to deal with.**

**Up front, I had advised her the only no-go zone was discussing my mother. Our relationship had had its issues, but I insisted they bore no connection with my current inability to just sit back and relax into my newly found free time.**





We met weekly, teasing out theories about self-determination, my identity, my friendships, my deeper relationships. Why I couldn't enjoy an aimless walk along the beach. She kept digging, determined to unravel that part of my brain that refused to relax.

Weeks passed, and I was convinced it wasn't working for me. But then I unwittingly dropped a breadcrumb. She prodded for more, and I crumbled, dissolving into tears. She had pierced my emotional armour, my inscrutable shell. No wonder she had a box of tissues at the ready.

Over the weeks that followed, we excavated my emotions to try and uncover the cause of my malaise. Inevitably, like many women from my generation, I struggled with expectation. Trying so hard to please everybody, to excel academically — justifying the private school fees — and always be turned out perfectly in public. Constantly working to earn the love and approval of her mother.

In the end, this had inevitably contributed to my evolving into an anally-retentive, controlling perfectionist. And people like me find it bloody hard just chill out, let their guard down.

I started to join up the dots. Our itinerant family wanderings, my hopeless period of post-natal depression, a mid-thirties diagnoses of both anxiety and depression, and the overall difficulty I experience relating to other women.

This frequently uncomfortable journey became key to my transition into retirement. I learned that my own pleasure is not conditional upon meeting the expectations of others, and even started to disclose some of these vulnerabilities to close friends, discovering these relationships became strengthened as a result.

I have adopted a more healthy regard for myself, granting that permission to just relax, explore new avenues. There are lingering difficulties, but that's okay — change can be testing.

## STORIES —

Recently, I enjoyed four months of long service leave – guilt free. I have become more involved with my local community and I have met, and become close to some amazing women. I have started to indulge my passion for writing and am excited to nurture this in retirement. I have joined some *Meetup* groups online, and try to get to at least three yoga sessions a week.

I often meet other women who are about to, or have just embarked on, retirement. Like me they are out and about, testing local opportunities. Some have firm plans about how they will spend their time – travelling, attending the University of the Third Age, starting up a home-based enterprise, volunteering. Others are more *laissez-faire*.

The key lesson for me is the importance of talking to each other. Women, particularly older women, benefit greatly from trusting each other and sharing openly. We have so much to gain and so much to offer in return as role models to our peers.

I have started actively designing the post full-time work version of myself and am wide open to whatever opportunities retirement presents.

**Though I still look forward to that day when I can fully enjoy an aimless walk along the beach. ♦**



**In January, Beverley Streater took a trial break from her paid job. She launched the blog *Classic Women*, offering tips on developing post-workforce relationships, solutions for maintaining fitness and health, and inspiring stories about women who must daily balance their roles as mother, daughter, grandmother, partner, friend and volunteer.**



[classicwomen.com.au](http://classicwomen.com.au)

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