

FINDING AN OLD FRIEND IN A NEW LIFE

by Irma Connell

For over thirty years I had celebrated the first day of school surrounded by a class of children whose eyes were either wide with excitement or closed with tears. So it was with great anticipation that on that special first day of school in September of 2004, I found myself on a plane flying over the very school where I had ended my teaching career a few short months before.

During the summer months I had strategically planned my “Ya-Hoo I’m Retired!” Tour out to the west coast and was diligent in arranging a flight that would have me high in the air at the exact time that teachers would be doing the attendance roll, calling out each new student’s name, one by one.

Ah yes, the baton had been handed over and I was “free as a bird,” winging my way west to Vancouver Island. I had planned my twelve days away, down to the minute – where I would stay – what I would do – how I would spend my free time. Yes, planned “down to the minute” because I was very good at managing time. After all, I had done it all my life for so many other people and circumstances.

I had planned that the first four days would be spent at a delightful Bed and Breakfast on the edges of Hammond Bay. The middle four days would find me on Salt Spring Island at the Forest Retreat sleeping in an “adult tree house” and a gypsy caravan and then finally ending the dozen days of delight I would treat myself to a self-indulgent experience at a Spa in a luxurious suite over-looking the Pacific Ocean.

Twelve glorious days to kick-start the next chapter of the big movie called “My Life,” starring... who? My life in a “supporting role” of educator, mother and wife for all those years had left little time for me and what filled my bucket. With this in mind, I started to think that maybe this might be a discovery tour of sorts – a search for someone to star in the missing leading role.

For the first eleven days of my twelve day get-away, I enjoyed the free time, albeit “planned free time” that retirement brings and followed the wind wherever it took me along the rugged paths around the Island. As I explored, on my own agenda, I was reminded of a poem by David Whyte entitled “Ten Years Later” that says “innocence is what we allow to be gifted back to us once we’ve given ourselves away.” Maybe that was what I was looking for now, without even realizing it – an innocence that was once me before I devoted my time and energy to my family and my chosen profession. With that thought rattling around in my new found freedom, I took a walk on the beach.

The winds had howled the previous night and the deafening waves had crashed over the rocks just below my balcony. This last day of my Island time was calm, warm and bright with promise. As I walked along the beach, I picked up so many beautifully coloured shells and rocks that my little day pack was soon heavy with their weight. I stopped for a moment and leaned against a rugged, weather beaten boulder that earlier that morning had been completely covered when the tide was in. The heat of the rock on my back and the light of the sun on my face warmed my very soul. So enveloped was I in this radiant hug from heaven and earth that when I opened my eyes I was surprised to see someone, far in the distance, walking toward me.

Who was this person that walked with such confidence along this rocky beach? Even though I was enthralled by the balance she showed and the carefree way she swung her arms, I sensed her nimble gait had purpose – a destination in mind. What was so familiar about her self-assuredness? Where and when was it that I had known her?

As she strode closer and closer I suddenly realized who she was and with a jolt I leapt away from the rock. I quickly started walking toward her and realized that I, too, had a new found balance. As we got closer, I could see her clear gaze and serene smile and I began to feel an excited anticipation begin to bubble up in my heart.

Finally, within touching distance, she drew me close with such a loving embrace that I was brought to tears. Remembered tears – tears of another life time – tears of yesterday – tears of joy for a new tomorrow.

It was... Me. I had returned.

“Welcome back,” I whispered. “I’ve missed you.”