

A Fork in the Road

by Mary Howley

Have you ever been in a social situation where you're introduced to a group of people, and inevitably you're asked what work you do? Having worked for many years as a so called 'academic' in the area of education and literacy at a university, I found it difficult to answer this question after I ceased working in that role.

I had my first child in my mid-thirties and then had two more children in quick succession. I loved my work with a passion, and I knew that I'd find it difficult to draw a line between work time and family time, so I made the choice to resign from my work and stay at home with my family.

It was difficult at first. I missed the routine of work and missed catching up with my work colleagues. Part of my identity, for so many years, had been embedded within my work. As I was no longer part of the paid work force, I found it difficult to think of what occupation I could categorize myself into.

I did work - at home. I was a sufficiently good 'motivational speaker' particularly when my children came to me for advice. I was a generous giver of 'hugs and kisses,' a responsible 'financial controller,' and kept on task when it came to timelines and schedules, (especially with weekly swimming lessons and playgroup sessions.) I was also organised, handled emergencies responsibly and a good mediator in my role of judge and jury during disputes between my three children. At the end of the day as I put my children to bed, I knew that this was where I wanted to be. So when I was asked what I did, I found myself saying that my work was at home, caring for my family.

However when my youngest child started school, I felt that I wanted to do something that added another dimension to my life. I didn't feel I could return to my previous work, because during the ten years that I had spent at home, technology had galloped ahead at such a pace that I had fallen out of the saddle long ago.

It was at this time that my husband and I had an idea. We considered buying a caravan from the 1960's era. We wanted to restore it into a mobile kitchen. Our caravan, affectionately named Betsy, would be transported to markets all over the countryside. We'd make and sell delicious, nutritious food. We vowed that sometime in the future, when we had time and space in our frenetic lives, we **would** make this happen. This dream of ours inspired me to enrol in a number of cooking courses, and wine appreciation classes. Tasting wines and food, learning about the regions that they were from, was a great way to take my mind and senses to other places.

I also embarked on a number of creative writing courses, because I wanted to write a novel...one day, about our travels with Betsy. Through each course, I made new friends, learnt new skills, and became more confident within myself.

It was around this time that we went on a holiday in Vanuatu. It was here that I had what I call a "fork in the road" moment. I went to a coffee plantation that was managed by an Australian who was a Vietnam War veteran. For years I had drunk decaffeinated coffee but the manager of the coffee plantation made an espresso coffee for me, telling me that I needed to taste 'real' coffee and that it would blow my mind!

I hesitated at first. I'd been drinking decaffeinated coffee for years, but as I drank the espresso, I was taken by surprise. The combination of freshness, smoothness and sharpness

of the flavours with undertones of rich, dark chocolate, left a sweet, lingering after taste in my mouth.

When we returned from the holiday, I did a coffee tour around the laneways and arcades of Melbourne that explored the art of coffee roasting, and coffee making. I also completed a barista course and coffee art course. This led me to the question –should I do nothing with my knowledge of coffee or should I venture along a new road into the hospitality industry? What would help me to find employment in hospitality? Would it be my interest in coffee or the fact that I enjoy the social contact of conversing and engaging with people? I knew that I was reliable and physically fit to cope with the rigours and demands of the various aspects involved with the day to day running of a food establishment. Despite all of this, it still took a few months, to pluck up the courage to walk into a café with my resume.

Two years later, I'm still enjoying working at the same café. I love the hospitality aspect of the work - meeting and greeting people, recognising familiar faces, remembering what type of coffee they prefer or where they usually like to sit. It's all part of making customers feel valued and welcomed.

My husband and I no longer dream of owning Betsy the food caravan. We're constantly ferrying our three teenagers to where they need to be. The mere thought of towing a caravan to markets, to sell food that we have toiled to make in a hot kitchen, leaves us feeling exhausted.

I haven't given up on writing that novel. It might be a story that has twists and plots involving travel, food and coffee while embarking on a journey of self-discovery, just by seizing the opportunity of a "fork in the road" experience.