

The Retirement Years

The Retirement Years (60 plus)

I retired from teaching at the age of 60. My wife, also a teacher, retired the following year. A highly conservative – some would say reactionary -- provincial government had taken the axe to public spending. Projects in public health, public works and particularly public education had to be slimmed down. As my wife wryly observed at the time, a new government had made education perfect.

There was nothing else for us to do but to ride off into the sunset!

For a number of years I occupied my time co-authoring social science textbooks designed to deliver the Ontario curriculum developed in the late 1990s. There were a number of companies whose main business was producing textbooks to be used by students individually.

The rising capabilities of computing for classroom application and reductions in the price of hardware and software eventually put great strain on the textbook companies. The five major players of 2010 fell to two by 2020.

Textbook writing was a wonderful experience. I had first gotten involved in a commercial project in my early teaching days and was able to write part time fairly consistently until my retirement. Upon retirement, the sky was the limit. I formed a strong business relationship with a retired geography teacher. We worked together regularly on a number of projects. Some of our best work was sketched out as we sat in the summer sun watching automobile racing.

But time moves on and so must we. I have retired from commercial writing. Publishing companies are understandably reluctant to produce material for which there is little demand. Instead, they publish short, snappy instruction pamphlets. These are considerably less expensive than one textbook for each student. Returns are smaller for companies, and of course, the same is true for the author(s). These days, I support a school Learning Foundation, which raises funds for its local school board. Its sole mandate is to provide financial assistance for students who are experiencing difficulty in attending school or fully participating in programs due to financial reasons.

What did I learn from being a teacher?

An acquaintance once asked me where I'd place myself on the political spectrum. Without hesitation I replied, "I'm a conservative by instinct, and a liberal by training." I believe most teachers are pragmatists trying to find out what works and what does not. Most teachers I have worked with like order, discipline, respect for others, and such virtues.

But let's get back to the original question at the beginning of this section. Overall, I learned that most teachers want students to do well. Admittedly, some teachers are prepared to go further than others to ensure student success. Schools tend to operate in a flexible manner. They give students flexibility in terms of the projects they do by being reasonable about deadlines and processes.

As a social science teacher, I believe that I was unduly fortunate. I could sense from the students in our classroom discussion that social attitudes were changing. I could, in 1990, have predicted that same sex marriage would soon be accepted in Canada. (Same sex marriage was not fully recognized by law until 2005). So how could I possibly have predicted that? Well, it got back to a point that used to crop up in many Sociology classes. In our discussion, a student might blindly observe "of course we are much more accepting than our parents' generation". I would jump on that remark and counter with, "Oh yes? What do you think would happen if two guys turned up at this Friday's school dance and danced all the slow numbers together?" Some of the male students predicted mayhem.

My original comeback line worked famously for about 15 years. But by then, you could see that it no longer applied. More students felt that these two particular students would be accepted. The amount of change in opinion of this issue was really quite staggering.

All too soon, it was time to think of retirement. The prospect of having lots of free time once I gave up my day job entranced me. I could spend time completing the rebuild of my 1972 MGB sports car. I could devote time to a second career in textbook writing for Ontario schools, which had developed nicely over the previous decade. My wife planned to retire a year after me, giving us time together to do some serious world traveling. It was a magical time.

Overall, I feel extremely lucky to have had a career and a life which gave me such security and opportunity. The only real blemish on our retirement plans was the premature death of my wife. But even then, we had 14 years of happy retirement and lots of memories.

Goodbye Mr. Chips is arguably the most famous school English language novella ever written. It tells of the life of a Latin teacher in a boys' school. Deeply loved by many of his former pupils, the protagonist dies surrounded by a group of them.

"Too bad he never married," one mourner observes. (This is in fact untrue. Mr. Chips was briefly married until his young bride was killed in an accident.)

"Sad that he had no children," observes a second former pupil.

“Oh, but he had hundreds of children,” states a third, referring to Mr. Chips’ pupils.

Mr. Chips’ final words were: “And all boys.”

I feel comfortable reading this novella, written 80 years ago.

Writing this book over the past three years has given me hours of fond (and some not so fond!) memories of teaching in years gone by. When I look back on the thousands of students whom I taught, these particular young people taught me far more than any book or seminar could even approach.

I truly hope that you’ve enjoyed reading the stories, shared a smile or two or perhaps had a thought-provoking moment where you realized that everything may not be the way it seems on the surface. Or maybe you just enjoyed a few of them while on a break.

I had a wonderful teaching career and am very thankful to all those young people who were my students. To them – I don’t know where you are now, but I do hope you are happy, content and in love with your life, because it’s truly a gift.

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