

Thoughts on a Sabbatical

By Mary Harboe, Norfolk, May 2008

The word "sabbatical" originates from the ancient Israelites' custom of allowing their fields and vineyards to lie fallow every seventh year. Nowadays, of course, it is more usually used for taking a year off for study or travel.

For me, "sabbatical" equals "freedom".

Freedom to be able to relax with the people I love when they need me - without counting days off, dashing to and from flights and frantically organising work cover.

Freedom to find my own natural creative work rhythm: so what if it happens to be from 2.22 to 6.06 in the morning, I can sleep later whenever I feel tired.

Freedom to wear whatever I fancy however inappropriate, to eat whenever I am hungry - not creating an anticipated appetite to fit around broadcasting commitments. Freedom to join a morning exercise class, to share lazy daytime chats with friends, to go for a walk, to have a massage... the list goes on and on but I am sure you get the picture.

What a heady feeling to have this freedom within my grasp, due to this wonderful word "sabbatical" - the adult version of a "gap year".

I have long been slightly envious of all those back-packing students on their extended holidays exploring far flung places. Does leaving school and the promise of a university place twelve months hence really merit the luxury of commitment-free and totally selfish adventures in exotic locations? I think not. Gap years are definitely wasted on the young, who are after all still "students" for whom (if they regain their motivation after switching off for a year) nothing more arduous than university life awaits. With the possible exception of exam time, they can still party all night, sleep until noon and wallow in long holiday breaks.

Surely it is those of us who have wearily trudged through years of employment, with weekends spent cramming in a social life and catching up on mundane chores, whose annual holidays are spent trying to relax and eventually succeeding just before it's over; it is *us* workers who need and would truly benefit creatively from the adult version of a gap year - or sabbatical.

I never had a gap year but passed seamlessly straight from school to a journalism apprenticeship on a local newspaper. Since then, up to April 30th 2008, I have worked... mostly at my chosen craft even in unusual places - such as teaching journalism in the Africa Literature Centre in Kitwe, Zambia and freelancing for the Middle East Economic Digest in Saudi Arabia. Where no journalism related employment was available, I found other outlets to satisfy my Protestant Work Ethic background - from catering embassy parties to teaching yoga classes.

From the age of seventeen until May 1st 2008 every moment of my weekdays has been accounted for. Now there is a yawning space waiting for tempting and exciting opportunities. My "gap" is between many years of work and.... What? The future is a tempting, open, as-yet-unwritten book. Watch this space.

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