

Something Has To Give

School Is So Demanding

Over the next year, I began trying to look after my health a bit more. I had always exercised in the mornings for about 20 minutes and, in fact, prided myself on keeping that going. I tried to be slower and less mad at work with no more than “intermittent” success. The teaching day might be short but, my goodness, it is intense! Sometimes I would dash into the toilet, unable to leave it any longer, (!) and I would almost always hear a voice outside asking someone where I was!! Worse still, the school, because of its reduced size, had no Deputy Head now, so virtually everything came my way. I had also, against my better judgement, taken on a bigger teaching commitment since the last inspection and that was to increase my workload significantly. I was now feeling that I was doing at least two jobs: teaching almost full-time and trying also to manage the school as its Head at the same time. With only a part time “administrative assistant” and an ever-increasing amount of bureaucracy, I was really at full-stretch. I managed this for two years and then fate intervened.

I had long had negative feelings about my job; these were to come at me with a vengeance now. I asked, in prayer and Quiet times, for Divine Aid but it seemed to show a great reluctance to come. The only way I could see for help to come was for me to have a lucky monetary win somewhere but, alas, that, too, showed no likelihood of coming. Help was to come, in fact, but not in the way I was expecting it...

It began on the first few days of the long summer holiday. I had kept going and got the school successfully to the end of the academic year (This was the year we received the “Achievement Award”, in fact). I had this annoying cough that just refused to leave me. I carried on going into the school every other day or so during the first two weeks to check up on the builders who were supposed to be installing another new heating system. As seemed always to be the way of it, there was nothing but hassle as pipes were being put in the wrong places, there were days when nothing was done etc. etc. I got steadily more unwell and, in the end had to go to the Doctor’s.

First, I had antibiotics for a chest infection, then more antibiotics for bronchitis, then another lot of antibiotics that were supposed “to kill virtually all known germs”! They had no effect, so back I went again. I walked to the surgery because it was so near to my home. This time the Doctor said I should go for an X-ray immediately! The X-ray department was just over the other side of town so I slowly walked to it, following the signs. I was worried because of the urgency of it and also because the Doctor had said I should leave my mobile phone number in case they should need to contact me with the results. I was supposed to be going on holiday to the North of England and, after giving the matter a few minutes thought, the Doctor had said I could go (abroad, definitely not!) provided I left my mobile number and “got to a Doctor if there was the slightest change”. Unfortunately, someone had turned the signs round and I walked about a mile in the wrong direction! By the time I turned up for my X-ray I looked and felt really ill and absolutely exhausted! It seemed I had... pneumonia!!

We had half the holiday we had planned. I stayed in the chalet almost the whole time and the rest of the family was able to get out and about and have something of a holiday themselves. This turned out to be ideal for me. I was able to sit, doze and just rest. I did nothing but write, sit and think and it was a mercy to me not to have ANYTHING to **DO** or anywhere to have to **GO**... And the view outside the huge chalet window could not have been better: I watched squirrels running up and down the branches of the huge trees that came right up to the glass; I looked at the sun glistening in, or the shadows of the leaves dancing across, the river at the bottom of a flower bordered path or I turned my gaze upward and followed the tree tops into the blue expansive sky... At times it felt blissful!! I had one bad time, however, which was alarming. Suddenly, one afternoon, when everybody was out, I felt *freezing cold* in the middle of a summer day! I turned the central heating up full, covered myself with blankets and lay on the sofa, waiting to see what was going to happen. I remembered what the Doctor had said about getting medical help immediately “if there was any change” and this alarmed me even more. Then the rest of the family came home and, for awhile, sat with cold wet towels on their heads to try to bear the heat in the chalet! By this time, I began to feel it was all going to be all right and, sure enough, after a few more minutes, I began to feel normal and VERY hungry! Fortunately, this never happened again although, some weeks later, I heard of a local girl who went into her parent’s bed one night

because she simply could not get warm and she died, lying between her parents – of pneumonia!

I spent the whole of that summer holiday, feeling physically too ill to do hardly anything at all. As the start of the new school year got closer and closer, so I got more and more worried – and my illness got more complicated. I just could not get myself going: everything was too much effort or, if I did start doing anything I got so exhausted and tired that I soon gave up. I was not sleeping properly now. I delayed going to bed until the very last minute and then would wake up *without fail* at about 2:30 every morning. It did not matter what time I went to bed or what I did during the day, I would wake up at that time without fail. It amazed me that it should be so exact every morning. I, who had for a long time now slept like a log, glad to put an end to my day, could not now enjoy such oblivion except for a couple of hours at most. I was also having those awful sweats again, especially in the middle of the night and the early hours of the morning...I occupied myself in the long, dark, slow-moving, lonely hours by watching Open University programmes on the T.V. or old videos and black and white films...

My feelings were so, so negative! Everything seemed full of bleakness, especially the future. If something could go wrong, I was sure it would and in the end there was so much to cope with that I just felt overwhelmed; in fact, I wanted to give up. It seemed that everything depended on me; that I had *everything* to do and if I did not do it then it would never get done. Worse, I could see no way out. I wanted rest, quiet, time to think, to feel, to DO what I wanted to and not to be always doing what had to be done...I prayed about this, of course; I took it to my Quiet Times but everything just seemed to get worse. In the end, I felt that the only way out was finally death! But could I bear it until then...? The Doctor explained that the “virulent bug” that had made me ill at the start of the summer had now attacked the neuro-transmitters of the brain and, thereby, caused changes in my mood and a worsening of those tendencies in me towards the negative. He felt that the original bug had now gone but it had left me with “agitated depression”. So, now I had to take anti-depressants as well as four tablets a day for my stubborn blood pressure! The bug had also left me with asthma, which I had never had in all my 50 odd years, and so I had two inhalers that I now had to suck on four times a day to ease my breathing and help that irritating cough that was still with me!

For the first time in my working life, the new school year began without me! I was going to the Doctors every two weeks and was to show no improvement for some months in spite of an increased and large dose of anti-depressants every day.

Mornings were easily the worst: I felt too ill to get out of bed until late morning and then *that* was with reluctance; I could hardly get myself to do anything except sit about enjoying the undisturbed peace and quiet of everyone else at work! Eventually I was able to get reading and writing again and I went out for a walk every afternoon and I enjoyed all of this. My Quiet Times became deeper very quickly and I soon began to feel that this was what I was really born to be doing! The hectic mornings of my school life had gone and, by the afternoons, I could really appreciate having time to myself. Solitude and Quiet began to feel like a therapy to me in themselves but I still could not summon any energy for doing much else. Each visit to the Doctor led to a change or increase in the medication and the feeling that I would be on my feet by the next visit in a fortnight. But it was not to be. After about a month I was sent to see an Occupational Health consultant who warned me not to expect an early improvement in my condition. He gave me another appointment to see him in three months time and suggested that I get some counselling to help. So, after this, my G.P. referred me for counselling and, as part of the process, I was referred to another G.P. for an initial assessment. I filled in a couple of Beck's questionnaires for anxiety and depression and came out as having, in spite of the high level of medication, a moderate level of anxiety and a moderate to severe level of depression. So counselling was seen as a definite need.

Perhaps the most helpful part of the whole process was this initial talk to the second Doctor as part of my assessment for counselling. As I recounted my symptoms to her I began to hear myself talking just as I had heard people in my profession talk when they were "burnt out", as it was colloquially called. This was an expression which meant they had run out of energy and had used up all their reserves so that they could, in fact, no longer do their jobs. I began now to see my illness in a completely different light. I, who had for so long seen myself as the "strong one" who kept everything going, had now to accept that I had come to the end of my teaching life; I simply could not do it any more. This became something of a turning point. I saw the Occupational Health Consultant again and a Consultant Psychiatrist who both agreed with my two G.P.s, and counsellor, that I

was now too ill to continue teaching either now or in the future: I was permanently disabled! I left teaching with high blood pressure, agitated depression and asthma, all of which had come upon me in the last two years. I, who in the past had hardly any absence in all those working years, was now permanently too ill to work!

Counselling then became a matter of coming to terms with the idea that I would have to leave my job and look for another, more fulfilling, and not to forget, easier, job *eventually* ...and it began to look as if eventually would not be for another year, possibly two, *at least*...I think this was shown immediately to be true by the surprising **EASE** with which I did this. After all those years in schools, after the initial shock had worn off, I hardly gave school life a serious thought. I suppose at last I had realised that my health was more important. So there, then, began a period of slow recuperation and adaptation to a completely different sort of life.

I began to spend lots of time on my own, walking, writing, reading all sorts of self-help and psychological books, quietly thinking and, of course, sitting as quietly as I could and just absorbing the atmosphere of the ever changing days and seasons. Soon some of my creativity was to come back but the depression was never to leave entirely although it became less threatening for most of the time. Unfortunately, the slightest set back or misfortune or bad luck would plunge me back all too easily into its black helplessness and hopelessness. So, I was left with a number of annoying health concerns and an all too fragile state of mind. There were to be many days of walks across the fields and meadows near my home which helped my spirits a lot and even got me feeling like I had nearly 40 years ago when I was a student with time to think about all sorts of interesting ideas as well as time to discover so much that was new to me. I looked forward to more of this even at my advanced age! And I wondered if my life had any more surprises as big as these last two in store for me?