

# A Renewed Sense of Freedom Reflections from a retired teacher

by Claudette Bouman



**Retirement...** what a marvellous prospect! It offers me a chance to get cracking on all those superb projects I've stored up in my head and heart for what feels like forever. Trouble is...I need help remembering what they are.

But seriously, both Barbados and Canada have been generous to me, providing a long, gratifying career in teaching where I faced the challenges of occupying young, curious minds. I was one of the lucky ones, never suffering unemployment or *underemployment*. I pursued a meaningful career with a promise of a pension at the end, if I owned enough staying power. When I finally said goodbye to teaching in Nova Scotia in June 2018, many of my friends who I'd left behind in my old island homeland, had either already left their profession behind or were just about to do so. That realization gave me the heartfelt conviction that my time had come.

To arrive at my decision, I answered two pertinent questions satisfactorily. Can I afford it? And am I ready? Let's just say I was ready long before I thought I could afford it, but that's a minor detail. Whether I can *actually* afford it remains for the future to answer. I longed to give myself more uninterrupted free time to devote to my own creative pursuits. Suffice it to say, I jumped when I felt thoroughly ready to retire.

I've heard of two interesting ways of defining emotional or psychological readiness to retire. By the time you're ready to retire: you're either too *full* or you're *empty*. I felt full and ready to set aside the buffet plate as I had feasted enough. The trappings of my inner and outer life needed a different direction. But what *was* the deciding factor? In my last two years a group of events, political and personal, conspired to urge me on towards the end point. Teachers, under the leadership of the NSTU, and the Nova Scotia Liberal government entered a long, nasty dispute that even today leaves a bad taste. After being legislated back to work from work-to-rule job action, the next year many teachers seemed to land right back at square one with unfinished bitter business. Then in 2018 came the Glaze Report and a rush to implementation promises without true regard for long-term teacher concerns. From this a looming illegal strike threatened like a blue demon on the horizon.

Teaching was not without its daily challenges. I asked my daughter recently if she'd ever reconsider her decision *not* to become a teacher. Her answer was *no*. Her reason was again captured in one word, *disrespect*. When practicing teachers speak of disrespect for their work or position, they often mean societal attitudes, various actions of Governments of the day, school administration and bureaucracy. But my daughter's reference to disrespect had to do with students' behaviour in the classroom and lack of consequences for students' disrespect and ill-discipline. Some of the major education issues are clearly system-wide. Clearly more needs to be done to close the achievement gap for African Nova Scotia students.

Even though provincial enrolment numbers are dropping, teachers routinely still face too large classes. I had direct knowledge of this as a parent and as an employee. My son's Grade 6 class had 30 students. By Grade 7, junior high French Immersion meant a classroom of 37. The numbers had to reach 40 before they could be divided into two classes. Just imagine what this meant. Those kids were seriously short-changed.

Despite common, obstinate education problems and frustrations, bright spots always appeared. I created an optimistic work-life balance with the steady support of family, friends and colleagues, staying the career course. My work-life balance meant setting aside time at the end of the day and week for myself, family and friends. School holidays allowed for travel, fun, and social activities. But one very important advantage of being a teacher in Nova Scotia offered me huge health and educational

rewards that I cannot easily overlook or deny. That benefit, gained through the collective bargaining of a robust and effective teachers' union, was the deferred leave.

In 2006-2007, after teaching for seven years with the Halifax Regional School Board, I took a year's deferred leave. Essentially, I gave up one year of salary to win a year of time from my day job. It was brilliant. The health benefits and sense of renewal were priceless. I did it again in 2013-2014 and instead of staying at home in Nova Scotia, I joined my husband and daughter to live abroad. We lived in West Germany, allowing my daughter to complete her Grade 10 year in Saarguemines, France. I observed, experienced and learned such different ways of life, made possible entirely with the deferred leave option.

The benefits were not simply my own but also those of my replacement teacher, who gained a full-term contract while I was living elsewhere just as I had benefitted from a teacher on deferred when I first started in Nova Scotia. At the end of those deferred leaves, my battery was recharged and I felt like I could pull up trees ready to face classrooms full of eager-eyed, high school students once again. I felt lucky and fortunate. My advice for anyone thinking of taking a deferred leave, are in the words of Eleanor Marx: *Go ahead!*

Finally, the best thing about retirement is it feels a lot like an extended deferred leave.

*Claudette Bouman retired from the Halifax Regional School Board (now Regional Centre for Education) in June, 2018. She was an English and IB teacher at Cole Harbour District High School. She has been an active member of the Black Educators Association since 1998.*