

Cycling through change

It seemed my life was turning over another page and I had to keep reading. The only thing was, I'd looked at the next page and it was blank. So, I headed for the beach, writes *Gail Rehbein*.



The beach has a reliable rhythm to it. The tides rise and fall, each day every day. There's always sound to hear – waves, seagulls, winds. And acres of sky to see: sometimes blue, sometimes clouded grey. It's meditative, in some way. Calming. It's the stuff that holidays are made of amid salty hair and sandy feet. Relaxing. It frees the mind to think. Or not to think, but simply empty, rest and be blank.

As I sat on the beach on the eve of my 53rd birthday, I felt that calm, relaxed and free feeling. It was early morning in late spring. I gazed into the distance under a broad blue sky and heard myself say, "I'd like to ride my bike more next year... I'd like to use my bike for transport as much as possible and only use the car occasionally".

As curious as I was with this announcement, Jane, my partner of 20 years, asked me why. Without hesitation, I replied, "Well, it'll make me fitter. It'll save us some money and I like riding my bike".

This is how it began. My year-long experiment to cycle through the seasons started three weeks later on December 1, 2014, and with it, my blog, *A Bike for All Seasons*. It was a commitment to doing something positive in my life. Something I'd enjoy and feel was worthwhile. It would be something to put onto the blank page.

A few months earlier, I'd been teaching academic writing to university students. Then, with cuts to university funding, three years of regular 16-week contracts came to an unexpected halt. Accolades for excellent teaching weren't enough and tears rolled from my eyes. I felt cut adrift.

It wasn't the first time I'd been in a void of regular work. My working life over the past 20 years resembles what management guru Charles Handy

described in the mid-1990s as the portfolio career. I gave up the security of full-time employment with a single organisation and began contracting my portfolio of skills to a variety of clients. I was 33. Along the way, a gap might appear before the next work arrived. Each time, when that void neared or appeared, I'd phone, email or meet with people I knew. New opportunities always opened to keep growing my portfolio of experience and skills.

This time though, knowing my teaching contract wasn't being renewed, felt different. So, I did something different. I didn't tell my network. I didn't try to fill the void with new contracts. Instead, I resolved I would write. Reading and marking other people's writing had left me thirsty to put my own words onto the page. I declared it would be my summer of writing. Little did I know then, that it would be a summer of cycling as well! Not to mention autumn, winter and spring!

Sitting on the beach that day, it was as if the planets aligned and two ideas merged. Not only would I aim to ride more, I'd also write about it. I'd commit to a year of cycling and keep a journal about my experiences. Then, because I really wanted to commit to the experiment for an entire year, I decided to write a blog and put my project out into the public eye. Once the idea for this experiment was planted in my mind, it grew quickly. Logic said let's start on the first day of January. Creativity replied, why wait? Start on the first of summer and ride through the four seasons. Logic said that's only two weeks away. Creativity answered, so?

A name for this project came quickly and easily. At school, I'd studied a play called *A Man for All Seasons*, written by Robert Bolt in the 1950s. It delves into the machinations of King Henry VIII's court and the moral dilemmas faced

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by the central character Sir Thomas More. Despite the changing seasons of thought, Sir Thomas remained true to his values. It resulted in his execution, but he died with a conscience clear. Apart from the weather and seasonal changes influencing my experience of this bicycle project, I knew I'd be challenged to elevate what I valued. What would I have to give up or change or resolve? This was going to be an internal journey as much as an external one. The project became *A Bike for All Seasons*.

Change was imminent with this experiment and it wasn't only going to impact me. It would affect Jane and our household. We needed to agree on some parameters to guide the project, and us. We kept the guidelines simple: Jane could step away from the experiment at any time and use the car, but if that purposeful trip could realistically be done by bike and was going to contribute to the household, then the car wasn't to be used.

This gave Jane the option to be independent of the project if it turned out to be 'my thing and not hers'. These conversations are essential when making changes. Change is challenging enough in itself and it's never possible to know

what will happen along the way, but talking openly helps.

Over the next year, I rode my bike to the beach, to meetings, markets, cafes, shopping centres and parties, and almost to a wedding. I rode in the heat, humidity and torrential rains of summer. I pedalled on windy days, through wintery cold temperatures and when spring arrived, was attacked by magpies.

After finishing four seasons of cycling on November 30, 2015, I'd pedalled over 3,777km (about 60-100km each week) and loved it!

Now I didn't cross the Sahara, climb Kilimanjaro or sail solo around the world. I was simply living in a suburban neighbourhood on the Gold Coast, in a mild sub-tropical climate, aiming to ride my bike more often and use the car when the bike wasn't a realistic option. It was a soft urban experiment. I wanted it that way. I didn't want extreme. I wanted to create change that would be lasting. And that's what happened.

Gently, day-by-day, week-by-week, I cycled my way towards a new way of living. Using my bicycle for transport, travel, fitness and just for the pure fun of

rolling along with pedal power, the joy of locomotion on two wheels was revived.

After a year of cycling, I am fitter, happier and with money saved from driving the car less. I know where my bicycle life can take me and where it won't. I feel a wonderful sense of achievement for making it through the year of riding and writing. And now I'm rolling into my second year to see what happens next.

Along the way, I've discovered that a blank page isn't such a bad thing. It's a bit daunting, at first. But when there's nothing, there's room for something. It might be a dream, something lost from the past or something never tried before.

ABOUT

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Gail is a bicycle-riding writer who has a knack for guiding people through change. This article is an extract from her forthcoming book about her bicycle project. To discover more about Gail and cycling through change, head to:



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