It was a familiar tale: a burnt-out teacher gives the game away after fifteen years to pursue a personal agenda—writing, reading and rediscovering life. But after three years he was back teaching. Why did he leave, and why did he return?

At the end of 1986 I resigned from full-time teaching after fifteen years in the classroom. My blood pressure was high. I was fed up with many things—the increasing politicisation of education; the popular tendency to blame schools for all of society’s problems and shortcomings; the expectation that teachers should be everything from social workers to social engineers; the downgrading of the status of the humanities in favour of materialist and technological values; classrooms increasingly full of chronically disturbed and apathetic children, and the schizophrenic expectation that I was somehow meant to deal with these while at the same time meaningfully work with the keen aspirers.

I was tired, too, of dealing with passive-aggressive student and parental apathy, and the deluge of change and counter-change from Official Reformers who administered The System but who, at best, had minimal contemporary experience of the face-to-face realities of crowded, under-resourced, recessionary classrooms (which statistically did not exist anyway).

A PERSONAL SABBATICAL

There was a personal agenda, too. With time on my hands, I would do what full-time teaching had prevented except in snatched, often tired, moments. I would treat my time as a form of sabbatical and read and think and write. I would contribute to family finances by casual teaching, or any other work I could get—to which end I lined up casual shelf stacking at a supermarket and tutoring as backups.

Numerous parents and students were upset that I was leaving. Their personal regard for me and their expressions of gratitude for what I had done over the years was gratifying, and, fleetingly, almost enough to alter my decision.

But I went ahead, and found in staffroom discussions and corridor asides that I was living out the dreams of quite a few colleagues compelled by various economic and personal circumstances to less-than-enthusiastic toil at the chalkface.

In reality, leaving was no easy matter. Full-time teaching had long been part of my life. Psychologically, as it turned out, it took a while to adjust to time without bells, time without periods, the silence of an empty house, the quietness of space without students, the loneliness of facing a blank page and trying to write. There was stress, too, in surrendering the security of a regular salary cheque.

A RETURN TO THE FRAY

The sabbatical interlude lasted three years. One book, seven poems, five book reviews, ten articles, two talkfest papers and one obituary later, I returned to full-time teaching. I had achieved my personal agenda, and more.

Casual—and later, supply—teaching in a variety of situations helped me re-evaluate and appreciate my teaching skills, while the many senses of failure and frustration known only too well to casuals passing through schools on a day-to-day basis were both traumatic and humanising.

Overall, the experience of generating income in an uncertain manner unexpectedly created new dimensions of personal self-confidence and self-esteem.

Time away from full-time teaching emotionally distanced me from the poli-
The long-awaited first royalty cheque for my book stretched only to furnishing a barbecued chicken and a bottle of wine.

NOT MUCH HAS CHANGED!

A financial factor also figured in my return. After the publisher’s advance had been deducted, the long-awaited first royalty cheque for my book only stretched to furnishing a barbecued chicken and a bottle of wine for the dinner table.

Nearly four years down the track, the psychological gains of the sabbatical are largely intact. Intact also is the catalogue of education ‘errors’ that helped me resign in 1986. Indeed, the list lengthens as economic rationalist perspectives impact upon education and schooling is increasingly pushed in utilitarian and corporate directions.

While mission statements contain obligatory feel-good references to schools existing for the sake of children, increasingly, I feel, they seem to exist for the sake of administrators and the practice of administration, to be wrapped up at the end of each year in neat and tidy tailored annual reports.

Real life and teaching are naturally messy, and do not mesh harmoniously with measurable objectives, multiple choice questions, and check-lists.

Good teaching is about variety, restlessness, adventure, novelty, rebellion—the antithesis of much that the uniformity and highly structured push of corporatisation is about.

IT’S MOMENTS LIKE THESE . . .

As a teacher, I have a personal agenda.
I try to foster in the classroom, as I have for years, diversity, difference, feelings, imagination, emotion, originality, creativity and the value of the individual.

I find sustenance, often in unexpected moments and events: the student who trustingly asks me to read a piece of private creative writing; the confession of intellectual joy when, after something demanding has been dealt with in class, a student says, ‘I went home and thought about what we’ve been doing, and now I understand’; the paragraph, the lines, the image in a piece of student writing that shine and make me smile, or laugh, or cry or simply wonder.

I am buoyed too by a trickle of bright, personable ex-students who, having gained first degrees and variously worked and travelled, are choosing to do a Dip Ed because they want to teach.

As for my classes, I can identify with these lines by the American teacher and poet, Joan Cutuly. She is describing her classes, (in her recent and remarkable book Home of the Wildcats: Perils of an English Teacher (National Council of Teachers of English, Illinois, 1993):

... my students and I argue a lot. There’s usually respect, often friendship, occasionally love in the room, but there’s a lot of anger, too—the chaos out of which stars are born.

Rowan Cahill now teaches at Boxen High School in NSW, and is writing a history of the Seamen’s Union.