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Joy Quest

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Cover Page Footnote

Heidi teaches English at Thornton Academy. She loves stories, teaching yoga, and writing with a hot cup of coffee beside her and her pup Tilly curled at her feet.

Joy Quest

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No man steps in the same river twice,
for it's not the same river and he is not the same man.

Heraclitus

Teaching is a job. It is how teachers make money to live. Our jobs are not meant to be our whole lives, but in teaching it is easy to blur this line because we are working with the greatest commodity there is—human potential. That comes with great responsibility. But if we don't make space for ourselves as human beings how can we help our students make space for themselves as human beings? And this space is essential to creating peace. Of this I am sure. And we need more peace in this world. Of this, I am also sure.

This is what I now know—almost a full year of school complete after taking a leave of absence last year, realizing I was totally burnt out and needed a pause, and after I wasn't sure I would go back to teaching at all. I asked for my leave late in the school year and am grateful that it was granted. Otherwise, I fear I would have left teaching because while it was scary to consider a leave (after 46 Septembers going to school, first as a student, then as a teacher), it was even scarier to consider staying. I was at a breaking point.

I've spent a lot of time reading, re-reading, and jotting notes from my journal. What follows are my reflections sprinkled with journal excerpts, sometimes included in the text and other times hyperlinked. Crumbs leading me back to deciding to take a leave and to the year that unfolded. Oh so differently than I expected.

Three Beginnings

Beginning 1

I'm going to start by going back to the beginning. Well, one beginning. September 1997 my first day of school in my own classroom (at Noble High School, where I would spend nine years and after student teaching and ed teaching for a year and a half after college).

There was a one in twenty chance of what was about to happen happening. Me tipping over on a desk, my cute olive green, linen dress flying up to flash the very first class I ever taught on my

own, landing on the floor with a thud. I lay there with my legs and stomach aching from where the chair attached to the desk banged into me as I descended and I knew I better get up if I had a chance of getting anywhere with this group of kids in makeup history. So that is just what I did and arose to 20 mouths gaping open. "Okay, so this is what is going to happen, you are all doing to laugh because I know you want to and then we will get started" After lots of "are you okay," my reply "not really, but..." we got on with it.

And while there were mishaps and angst along the way, I loved it. And you know, it loved me back. Until it didn't and I didn't. Don't get me wrong, being in my classroom with my kids when the magic was present still lit me up-but those moments came further apart and more and more other tasks became amplified. And it felt like I had gotten lost in it all.

Beginning 2

It's funny how the world works. On April 14th, the Tuesday of April break 2021 I sent an email to the Headmaster formally requesting my leave. That same day I had lunch with my best friend Gretchen, who since things had moved so quickly, I hadn't even told her I was considering a leave. Her response when I told her, as we sat by a heat lamp on the deck of one of my favorite restaurants on a spectacularly chilly and rainy day, was "about time!" I didn't realize I had been outwardly contemplating this idea for some time. Before COVID, before this breaking point. If anything, COVID gave me permission to take a leave as it taught my perfectionist, control freak self that I had control of nothing.

That day at lunch there was only one other table occupied. We really didn't pay them any mind until they wrapped up and Gretchen realized one of the women was Flynn (the wife of her friend Danny who she had been friends with since middle school). I know Danny & Flynn as well. [Flynn](#) is a full-time artist and I asked her how things were going, thinking COVID may have been hard on her business aptly named FLYN. She responded that her [hats](#) were killing it in a store in Portland and she wanted to expand to more stores but needed someone to help. Unlike myself, without thought, I replied, "want me to do it?" She whipped her head toward me saying something like, "seriously, I would love that." Just like that a path I never imagined unfolding. An ending that I realized was a beginning as well. School got out on June 11th and as I wrote in my journal,

It was a limp to the end although the last week was great-I did a Maine Adventure Virtual Escape Room-I loved it and so did the kids-it was a really nice way to wrap up. Before that the idea that everything is controversial and political has been soul crushing and led to me feeling like I needed to make myself small. I hadn't been able to actually teach as civility seems non-existent. This resulted in an inability to consider anything thought-provoking because it seems as individuals we are absolutely sure we are right

and that anyone who believes anything else is therefore wrong. So shutting down replaced consideration. No need to contemplate another idea or perspective.

At this time, I was worried I was giving up. My sister reminded me you can't call spending 25 years committed to something, then deciding you need a change or maybe just a break, giving up. I truly didn't think I would return to teaching at this point. When I told my friend Courtney (also another teacher) that part of me felt like my leave is giving up (because I still doubted myself) she told me about an episode she had recently listened to on Glennon Doyle's *We Can Do Hard Things Podcast* – [QUITTING: When is it time to let something or someone go?](#) When I took time to listen, I almost couldn't breathe as much of what Glennon was saying was so much of what I needed to hear to know I was doing anything but giving up.

In addition, Brené Brown's Unlocking Us Podcast held so much in the way of understanding myself as well. I began to see that the workaholic in me was tied to the perfectionist in me. Time again and again, I go back to this excerpt from her book, [Gifts of Imperfection](#). I was ready to let go of being a workaholic and perfectionist and realized I couldn't do so while mired in teaching that not only allows these qualities to manifest but rewards them. I not only wanted to step away, I needed to.

I think it is important to note that at this time, even though I knew I needed this pause, I also felt like taking a leave was very indulgent. I realized how much privilege I had to be able to do this. I had to convince myself that I had also worked really hard to put myself in a position to be able to do this. Whenever I shared (a bit shyly) with others that I was taking a leave, again and again people responded how brave it was. Eventually, I was able to start seeing this bravery. It wasn't just me who was a workaholic-it was not just teaching that seemed to require this hustle-our society in general is fixated on busyness.

Beginning 3

And then another beginning-the first day of school 2021. Sitting in the window of my apartment, I live on campus and the stadium is just outside my window, I watch the annual game of Entourage-it has become a mainstay at TAMS (Thornton Academy Middle School, where I spent the previous 15 years teaching). I smiled as I watched and when the game was over I knew I was okay with being an observer rather than a participant and that felt really strange and calming all at the same time.

Gap Year

I decided to consider my year off as a Gap Year which I was calling Joy Quest. Looking at my [journal](#) entries reveals much about my intention for taking a leave, it helps me see my underlying thinking. I had truly loved teaching but had become disappointed and discouraged by what teaching had become. I wanted to see if I could rediscover my love for teaching and also figure out how to not let teaching take up so much space in my life. Without intending to, I had allowed my job to be too much of my life and now feeling so burnt out I knew I couldn't sustain this any longer. All of September and part of October I felt disoriented. Now I know this made total sense since I had purposefully left a cycle I had been in since I was 4. The new year in January means little to me. The new year starts in September. Without the normal traditions that accompany this new year I felt untethered.

I had planned to spend my days writing, reading, going for walks, doing yoga, and meditating in what I thought would be a regular schedule. My friends at TAMS called my Polly Planner because I was always on top of every detail and had everything organized. I just thought this would transfer to these things I was wanting to spend more time doing. What happened instead is I just let the days carry me where they did. I gave myself space without a prescription for what my time needed to look like. I had never done that before. And I started to wonder what it would be like if I didn't go back to teaching. If my year off was a transition to something else. I liked being able to eat when I was hungry and being able to go to the bathroom when I needed to (any teacher will totally understand this). It's funny how much freedom that felt like. And I had the freedom to wonder. I wrote on 10/26,

Is this really my life? I'm sitting here at 9 am drinking coffee, listening to Lovely Day and writing. I'm thinking a lot about school and feeling like in some ways I would like to go back having created so much space-however, a bigger piece of me thinks I'm done with that piece of my life and now that I can see more clearly (honestly I even think colors are brighter to me) I am grateful for all I have learned and am wondering if the work I still have to do is outside of school-I don't know yet. :)

The power of I don't know yet. A brand new concept to me. I leaned into this and leaned into opportunities as they presented themselves. Tilly Dutton, a sweet eight-week-old Goldendoodle joined our family in early November. We learned of her existence in the world on Thursday night at 7 pm and on Saturday at 2 pm we were in Vermont picking her up. I had never had a dog before so this was a completely new adventure. And I started doing some other work at Samudra helping Sarah to manage the studio.

Throughout late fall and early winter I spent my days with Tilly at my feet as I did work for FLYN or Samudra or writing for myself, heading out for walks and play time with other puppies in our neighborhood, heading out to meet with Flynn, go to businesses to deliver hats, meeting with sewers, etc. and going to/teaching yoga classes at Samudra. Days fell into an easy pace of low key mornings drinking coffee and doing work then venturing out. Nothing was a rush, no need to hustle. And I loved it. I loved the work I was doing with FLYN, amazed by how many skills I had learned from teaching were applicable to marketing. It felt good to be helping to build this company and having meetings outside in the yard over coffee or over a lovely dinner at Flynn & Danny's where FLYN was based. I continued to wonder about going back to school and if this meander in my path could in fact be my path. 12/31 I noted in my journal,

"Going Back" my thought is who wants to go backward? That's how back feels to me. It's frustrating that the only reason I'd really consider going back is insurance. I've been struggling with finding the accurate words for what I'm feeling and I saw this on Now Spark Creativity's Instagram Feed: "...so many experienced, creative teachers are asking themselves if it's time to leave the profession." going on, ...talks about what she calls teacher demoralization, a different way of looking at what is so often labeled 'teacher burnout.' and on, ...you'll find out how demoralization might be playing a role in your own life in teaching right now, why it's completely different than burnout."

THIS. And I'm realizing that I've been grieving what teaching used to be. I was so lucky to have amazing experiences. But that situation no longer exists-I've been fighting so hard to hold on to something I loved but just isn't reality anymore. When I think of leaving teaching I feel a sense of guilt because one of my core values is and has always been working to make the world a better place. It feels like I am giving up-but a middle school classroom isn't the only context in which I can stay true to that value-I'm starting to better understand that. And I need to remember that version of myself in my twenties who went to Maple's for cardamom ice cream on Forest Ave. in Portland who was struck by the fact the owner had been a teacher and now owned this business-I was so amazed by this! It stayed with me. For years I have dreamed of doing something different. I just had no idea what that would be so I felt stuck. Then-I simply had enough-pressed pause and this whole new world opened up to me. It's fascinating really. I need to figure out insurance. And that is figureoutable :) And I need to reimagine how my life can be-work determines a lot of life. I've loved the lifestyle teaching has given me-summertime off and vacations. But when I'm grading on weekends and evenings and the time off during the summer is reduced to the safety of July, do I love that? And insurance provides security but I haven't felt very secure the last few years. Hmm...It feels very clear-just hard to adjust to this new meander in my path. Letting go, being curious, trusting it will all work out.

Toward the end of January I had pretty much decided I wasn't going back to teaching as these [journal](#) entries express. I was still conflicted but getting excited about this possibility. I even met

with my Headmaster to see if it was possible to live in the dorm for a year if I didn't return to teaching in order to figure out a new living situation as I had been living off the down payment I had saved. :)

And then...I met with my realtor and learned that to get a mortgage I need two consecutive years of employment at the same place. Even though I had been teaching for 20+ years, 15 of which at TA and I was living in the dorm still it didn't matter. Neither did my great credit score. I was frustrated and disappointed.. Literally, the following day I met with Flynn. Business needs were evolving and it looked like my job would be shifting to production, which was not at all what I had signed on for and did not have much interest in.

Ultimately, after a lot of thought and processing I let Flynn know I was not interested in this and I am so proud of myself for saying no. My usual MO is to put others needs ahead of myself and slog along even if I don't want to. I knew I was walking away from a project I was excited to see develop, but I just knew it wasn't the right fit now. Life really is funny.

Transformation & Reinvention

So...I had until the end of February to let TA know if I was coming back and my thinking was still who wants to go backwards?! But if I were ever going to move out of the dorm going back to teaching made the most sense. Didn't it? Trying to figure out what I was going to get up to I had a conversation with my friend Mike who was my teaching partner at Noble and currently lives in London. You know those friends who just get you? He is one of mine. He said something to me in this conversation that was everything. He said, "all of your atoms change every 365 days so you literally can't go back because you are different." Hmm... Once again things felt clear.

I was heading to the Big Island in Hawaii for a yoga [retreat](#) and decided I didn't want to wait until I got back to decide so I just went for it and let my Headmaster know I was going to teach next year. Honestly, I don't know if he or I was more surprised by this decision. I noted this in my journal stating,

Told Rene yesterday I am going to teach next year. And I'm truly feeling okay about it. So much change in two weeks.

In Hawaii I had so much space to just be and think. I found myself leaning into the idea of transformation writing,

Transformation-this concept is nourishing me.-the continual change of ourselves and the world-constantly moving-so slowly-every single second-the saying change is the only constant all of a sudden making so much sense to me.

Sitting with a cup of coffee, perched atop the hill at our house, watching the ripples of the ocean, I thought about all of the currents and then connected that idea to the threads that weave themselves through us and the world. Writing,

Multiple facets of who we are-I think perhaps I have mistakenly been considering myself in terms of the singular. This is strange to me as one of my favorite lessons with students is the TED Talk, "The Danger of a Single Story." After becoming pretty clear that I wasn't going back to teaching-I was going to jump in feet first with FLYN several things unfolded quickly and changed everything.

I returned from Hawaii refreshed and refocused. I did a little bit of work with FLYN but by mid March I had wrapped up that work. I continued my work at Samudra, hung with Tilly and enjoyed the world coming back to life as Spring unwound. At the end of March I also found out I would be teaching at the high school next year rather than going back to TAMS and I didn't even question it. I'm continuing to lean into the opportunities which present themselves.

I also found so much gratitude as I leaned into the days enjoying simple joys. And I also found more clarity. Writing on 5/3,

The gratitude I have for the time and space I've created is immense. While I would love to continue to live in this space and pace, I think my practice of being human will gain so much from teaching next year. I need to remember- response rather than reaction.

Looking back at an entry from 5.20.21, I posed the question:

Will I come back? I was always questioning this and am not sure I fully realized.

My thought on going back now, a year later—

I'm teaching next year but I'm not going back. I'm moving forward, leaning into the next opportunity. And we will see what happens :) 180 days-40 weeks-40 weekends. I'm looking forward to approaching the year with the new mindset I've cultivated.

This change in perspective has been critical for me. It's not all or nothing. I can teach without giving my whole self and too much of my life to this job. I can do really good work with and for kids and not expend 100 %, leaving nothing for myself. The school year ended and it felt like my

leave did as well even though there were two months until school began. I soaked up summer—all of it, not just July which is usually the month that is school free. :)

I love professional tennis and particularly love watching Wimbledon. On the 7th of July I watched an interview with Novak Djokovic before the Wimbledon Semi Finals. When asked to describe his year in one word he replied, “Rediscover...the joy of playing.” I wrote in my journal on the same day,

Hmm...I feel this. I think if I had to choose just one word it would be realizing.

What I’m realizing is part of my struggle teaching was finding my authentic voice—at the core of who I am. Not the angry/frustrated/disappointed reactive voice—but the deeper, more kind, more thoughtful voice. That is the voice I want to carry forward. I realize I have also cared way too much about way too much and that resulted in overwhelm and burnout. I need to learn and have been learning to let go. And focus on what is most important to me.

I’ve learned the importance of rest. This may be the most important lesson I’ve learned this year. Real rest—no just checking out to binge watch something—daily time to breathe and be. Pausing. There is so much power in the pause. While I will miss having the ability to plan my time as I wish, I am looking forward to the opportunity to practice pressing pause in a busier environment. There is so much to be learned.

It is all about cultivating balance. To be balanced I need to be grounded, rooted. And it occurs to me that it isn’t so much what I do for work but rather how I live my life—the way I show up in my life. This is so freeing. Hmm...Inhale, exhale—repeat.

Repeat leads me to the root “re-” which seems to be coming up a lot for me in words like: realign, revisit, recreate, redesign, reinvent, reflect, reinvention, redefine, relish, reassess. Reflecting on the word make, as in make a living, and other words for make such as construct, build, create, form, forge, mold.

Rethinking what work is. Learning to trust myself, realizing how much I haven’t. Noticing more fully the small joys, which I am recognizing aren’t small at all, but instead are everything. I realize I love days filled with small, ordinary moments of simple joy. And to notice these small, ordinary moments I need to create peace—when things are chaotic it is easy to miss these moments.

And I have learned how to say no. Or maybe it’s I’ve learned to say yes to myself. :) Not doing things because I think someone else thinks I should. I saw a quote, I don’t remember by whom-

“If it isn’t a hell yes, it’s a no.” How freeing! Better to disappoint someone else instead of myself.

So much learning. So much to learn. Gratitude for it all.

An Ending/A Beginning

I wrote in my journal on 6/22 in reference to the poem “[Fire](#)” by Judy Brown which I was introduced to in the Advanced Writing Institute,

I was so taken by how this poem holds so much of where my thinking is after creating space this year. And I’m asking myself, how can I continue to create space? Not only for myself but also for my students? It has me thinking once again about estuaries and cocoons, places of pause. For me, “Fire” is like instructions for how I want to be and to teach. I got teary when Rebecca read it to start the morning. And I keep coming back to it. Concepts of burning out, rekindling, and what lights me up.