

# LEMON DELICIOUS OR BOILED CABBAGE

**“When I retire I’m going to…” and off she went, reciting a long list of all the exciting adventures she’s anticipating When The Time Is Right.**

Counting, she ran out of fingers and then out of breath. And in the pause, I asked “Why are you waiting until retirement?”

Apparently that was the wrong question to ask, because her response was an even longer list of reasons why these activities should be delayed until after her departure from her paid job. You’ll have heard them… no time, no money, no holiday leave, too busy, too tired, too many responsibilities…

Perhaps unfortunately, I’m the kind of friend who doesn’t always know when to leave well alone, so I asked “Aren’t those just excuses?” Her withering look made me back off a bit, but I’m no sissy about these kind of conversations, so it was time to go for the jugular. “What if you don’t make it to retirement?”

OK, so maybe that was a step too far, after all, she’s fit and active, with no complicated history or dodgy genes. But still, who knows what kind of bus is coming trundling around the corner?

She came back, of course, with a counterpunch. “It’s alright for you, you’ve been off and done your gap year, while the rest of us slogged on.” And she’s right, I took my year off, deliberately mid-stream. Rather than wait a decade, the choice to do something completely different was a response to a lifetime of following other people’s rules.

When we were kids, many of us learned that you had to wait for pudding until after you’d eaten your meat and veg. In my family, this rule was so strong that I was often told to leave the table, standing by the back door to clear my plate of hated, boiled cabbage. The trouble was, that by the time it was finally done I was either too full for Mum’s glorious lemon delicious pud, or I was too late, with dinner over and the table cleared. Either way, there was little incentive for ploughing my way through a mountain of limp cabbage.

Work has become my friend’s boiled cabbage. She’s patiently chewing her way through days of hospital humdrum, punctuated by the weekends. Does she love her job? Not really, though the knowledge that she’s helped someone recover their health does give her a lift – especially when a family stops to say thank you.

I know why she stays on though. As a woman in her late 50s, with an uneven work history from raising her family and resources depleted by divorce, she is deeply conscious of her precarious financial situation. When National Super kicks in at 65, she won’t be hanging up her nurse’s scrubs. Like a growing

number of Kiwis, she’ll likely continue to work until closer to 70, or until her occupation and her capacity are no longer in sync. In the meantime, work is about obligation and responsibility.

With weekends full of domestic duties, family and friends, she’s deep in the comfortable rut of routine and familiarity.

When I ask what she’s doing for herself, she is hard-pressed to know, and that’s where the retirement conversation comes in. She sees finishing work as her reward for years of service. Apparently, when it comes, she’ll be free to do all the things she believes she can’t do now.

There’s a deep irony here, because her energy and imagination is focusing on how to make the most of a time far ahead, when she has far more options now than she realises. Most of us do the same.

So I asked how life could be better now? What choices and changes could make this into The Right Time.

Over a cuppa, it turned out that her boiled cabbage story centred around housework, and her lemon dessert was writing. Poetry dismissed as nonsense, a waste of time, in a household dedicated to practicality. But that was years ago, and at some point you have to take charge of your own dreams.

As we talked, she saw the need to give herself permission to see things differently, and she began to get creative. A few weeks later we spoke again and she’s been pulling out some of the writing she did years ago. This week a text from her about a poem that popped into her head while giving a patient a bed bath. Really? Hilarious!

There’s plenty of encouragement to ‘dream big,’ but size is definitely in the eye of the beholder. Dreams that are too big can give us an out, a reason not to go after them or be held to account for achieving them. So get curious about what would make your life better now, not just waiting for some indefinable future point. It might be the smallest thing that will make all the difference.

Dreams don’t always need loads of money or time. They start with permission. That’s you giving yourself permission to think and to do what makes life worthwhile for you. Boiled cabbage will always be there, but setting your own sights on now means you can eat dessert first.

Author, Jenny Magee works with women to make the most of the second half of their lives. Her latest book **A Bold Life - How Boomer Women are Reinventing Life Beyond Fifty** is available at good bookstores or from [www.jennymagee.com](http://www.jennymagee.com)

