

Good morning. My name is Nancy McGuire. I've been a member here at the Washington Ethical Society for just over 12 years. I have been a science writer for the last 16 years. This year I am taking a "reboot break" away from my career to re-evaluate my goals and directions. I'm going to be talking about why I'm doing that and how it's going so far.

The idea of taking a break started forming in my mind in July 2010, when my sister Linda and I went to New Mexico to stay with our Mom during her last week of life.

Mom had been slipping into dementia for several years, so by the time she reached that final week, we had already done much of our grieving. The Mom we knew was long gone. There was no shock that the time had come, we only needed to see a long process through to its conclusion.

Linda and I were surrounded by love and support from the hospice staff, our parents' friends, and our own friends, some of whom we had not seen for many years.

We shared dinners and long conversations together, and we allowed ourselves to laugh again. It occurred to me that I hadn't been laughing much lately. I hadn't spent much time with friends, or seeing movies, or walking around taking photographs like I used to -- all of which Linda and I were doing during our three weeks away from the daily routine.

At the time, I was more financially secure than I had been in a long time, but every day seemed pretty much the same: get up, commute to Arlington: one bus / two trains / and a quarter-mile walk, spend all day sitting in a cubicle staring at a computer screen, commute back home to Silver Spring. Stare at the TV for a couple of hours, go to bed, then get up the next day and do it all again. The weeks and months seemed to fly by, but I can't point to anything I did that was really significant -- nothing that you could really call "living my life".

I told myself all the things that grownups are supposed to say:

- "I'm just glad I have a job, especially in this economy."
- "If it was fun, they wouldn't call it work."
- "Just ride it out. This too shall pass."
- "Find what *you* can do to make your work situation better."

At the beginning of August, I was home from New Mexico and back on the job, writing up my performance goals for the next year, getting documents ready for the upcoming government contract renewal.

Two weeks later, I was back on a plane to Palo Alto, California for our contract's annual performance review at Stanford University.

Then it was time for the end-of-year reports and preparing and staffing three exhibits for two conferences that bracketed Thanksgiving week -- same as every year. I didn't have the time or energy for turkey dinner with family or friends -- I was too busy dealing with vendors, shippers, and staffing schedules.

I realized that unless I made a change, this was going to be my life for the next 15 years or so. I had been looking around for other jobs, not really knowing what I wanted. But there was no time to do any serious looking, and not many openings were available.

One day, it occurred to me that I had enough money in my emergency fund to live on for just over a year. I thought to myself, "If THIS is not an emergency, then what IS?"

In fact, I had already spent one evening in a hospital emergency room because I had not taken time away from my work schedule to have a doctor examine an infected spot on my knee until it was too bad to ignore. Also, I had no time or energy for friends, family, or fun.

There was no way to reconfigure my current job to make things tolerable. I realized that I was going to need a full year off, and I would not be coming back to that job afterward.

The option period for the government contract I was working on was over at the end of the year, and much of what I did find rewarding about my job would be ending. The end of 2011 seemed like a good time to bow out.

Julia Cameron writes about the events that always seem to follow a major decision. It's almost as if the universe is testing your resolve, seeing if you're really serious about making the change.

After I had decided to leave my job, I received an award from my company, followed by a promotion and a raise. Should I stay? I thought it over carefully -- for about 10 minutes. No, I had to leave.

I spent the year making preparations:

- Tracking my spending to see how much money I would need, where I could economize
- Researching what kind of health insurance I could get
- Reading about other people who had taken "reboot breaks"

That last year at work was chaotic and stressful, but I stayed on because we were so thinly staffed that my presence was needed. I knew that I was going to leave, but I didn't tell any of my co-workers until December.

As my reboot year began, I expected that I would spend a month or two in vacation mode, then launch into my massive do-list, based on retirees I know who are busier than ever.

I expected that my progress (rest, projects, reconnecting) would follow somewhat the same schedule as what I had read about

Now that I am eight months into this year, I am actually much less focused and less driven than I anticipated, but this bothers me less than I thought it would. Clearing out the daily routines and the mental chatter is opening up a space for new things to emerge. My do-list *is* shrinking, but very slowly.

Time has slowed down considerably -- it used to rush by so quickly. Last year seems like the far distant past.

The noise level in my mind is down as well, allowing me to pay attention to things that I had pushed aside. I'm more aware of what I truly enjoy and care about, rather than what is merely urgent.

I am finding support and inspiration from a variety of sources:

- Encouraging and thought-provoking responses to my blog posts
- My monthly writer's group, where we read and comment on each others' creative work
- My Deepening Circle, which frequently provides me with some very powerful insights, as well as friendship and encouragement
- I am really listening to what my inner voice is asking/telling me -- sometimes in a very oblique way, through mental images or "hot button" responses

I'm beginning to reconnect with the world, but more on MY terms now. I'm not what you would call efficient or highly productive just yet. It feels more like sampling dishes at a buffet -- trying little bits of a lot of things to see what I want more of.

I get together with long-time friends and former co-workers for social occasions and for my writing group.

Freelance projects are finding me -- not enough to live on yet, but not bad for doing hardly any marketing. I am interviewing some of my colleagues for an article I'm writing, and thoroughly enjoying it.

I'm sending out my fiction pieces for publication -- only one acceptance so far, but I have several pieces in the works.

My days are a mix of projects, long walks, yoga classes, and activities with friends and by myself. I also set aside plenty of time for daydreaming.

What's next?

I am exploring the career possibilities related to the various interfaces in my life, especially science and society

I am selectively taking on more freelance writing projects

Preparing more of my writing for publication

Sharpening my focus -- what do I really want?

I don't have any profound answers yet. It's typical for me that when I have a big decision to make, I spend a long time floundering around, not knowing what I want. Then, unpredictably, something will snap it all into focus. That's when I become decisive and start putting things into place, but not before. I trust that this process is playing itself out again in my life, and I think that this year is one of the best investments I've ever made.

THANK YOU