

Shadows of graduation linger

By Peg Sheldrick

This is really more about consequences than decisions, but consequences are part of what makes decisions difficult, and so are related.

First, let me say that I have always been a "good" student. I never worked particularly hard at it, or at least never felt like I did, but I was always a good student.

I always figured one of these years they'd find out I wasn't as smart as they seemed to think I was. But they never did. The good student image persisted.

It carried me along from kindergarten through elementary school, to junior high and high school, and even into college. Through four years it held on, giving me a safe, familiar role to play.

I was still playing the second semester of my senior year — 365 days ago— when the end of that particular stretch of road came into sight.

That I should pass immediately to graduate school and further scale the heights of academia was manifestly clear to some members of my family. But for me, for the first time in a long time, the answers weren't so clear.

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I put off inquiring about grad schools 'til it was too late. I took my GRE on the last possible date and looked at my scores

only once when they came back. Little by little the knowledge grew inside me that I would not be going to graduate school.

I felt guilty about family and friends' unfulfilled expectations even before the last ceremony.

I remember my graduation in snatches; mostly I remember the unspoken tensions of that day. The woman in the robe who strode to the stage, head bowed to hold the mortar board in place, seemed then and seems now like another person, the quintessential paper chaser, keenly aware of being all dressed up with no place to go after stepping off the garlanded platform.

That figure in the robe has followed me through the year since, and even now lingers in a cardboard frame on my desk.

The face in the picture smiles but the

muscles are flexed just a bit too tight, the eyes squint too far closed, arm is tightly clasped around a friend who will be leaving too soon and a moment that will not last.

After the day of that picture, the woman in the robe would reappear every now and then, silently summing up what I had left behind.

She chased me through the summer, to Minneapolis, to Winnipeg. I found her waiting in my parents' home when I came for a visit. She lingered in the odd corners of my old apartment when I returned from traveling. At night in the shadow of her black robe, I would search my ceiling through wet eyes for the answers I still lacked.

Gradually I found that I could push her from my thoughts by focusing on work and people directly in front of me. If I didn't look too far ahead or back, she left me for awhile. And I found that the "real world" was the same place I had always been, that activity and inactivity are only as empty as you allow them to be.

I found myself shying away from commitments, taking work as a temporary secretary one month, a warehouse worker another.

After long thought I re-entered classes— as an extension student, studying at night things I never tried to learn the four years of days before. I found my way back to the university, to a side of it I hadn't seen before.

Finally I came far enough back to reach a particular room in a particular basement, full of familiar typewriters and unfamiliar faces. Through an act of kindness I found

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my way back to the printed page. I was given a reason to sit down once a week and write.

Gradually it gave me back some self-respect. A simple requirement. "A poor thing, but mine own," to quote a friend. But it has made the difference.

This small business, this call for sixty lines once a week, has pierced inward darkness and through this pinprick has come a *camera obscura* look at what lies outside, a notion of where I would like to be. It would not have come to me, I think, in the halls of the dusty libraries my former path of the last resistance was leading me to.

In some ways it is as if the ceremony last spring never happened. Last week, tucked in the corner of a jewelry box, I ran across the honors medallion I wore; the same day the headline on my column referred to me as "graduating."

The year has been painful emotionally, difficult financially, but satisfying inwardly. The untidy stack of yellowing newspaper cluttering the footlocker in my room means as much to me as the sheet of university bond handsomely mounted in its red folder they handed me last spring.

The decision not to take the obvious course was not an easy one to make or to live with; some would see it as an avoidance of a decision. But I am no longer plunging ahead without questions. I'm not running scared; neither am I standing still.

The woman in the robe is still with me, but we travel together now, instead of one fleeing the other. Where we will go from here remains to be seen. All I know is that I don't have any more doubts or regrets about where I've been.

