

I'm giving up my column – and I mean it (I think)

LES WALTON
COLUMNIST

FOR my fan, who has read my column over the last couple of years, there has been a constant theme: the desire to provide stability for children, encouraging them to enjoy the present and remember the past, whilst, at the same time, looking towards the future with hope and optimism.

When I was invited by the Journal to write a regular column, I decided to write around 900 words about every year of my life. I have described my childhood, my schooling, my student years, teaching, becoming a headteacher and Director of Education and my most recent adventures on the national scene.

I have tried to introduce some humour into my writing, whilst at the same time making some serious points. To adapt Bob Monkhouse's words: when I started this column, everyone laughed at my ambition to write humorously – no one is laughing now!

This year, I will be 72. I will have written 73 articles for the Journal. The reason why I have written 73 is that my very first article was about my thoughts as a foetus, three months before my birth. This is my final article in the series 'Education, the Rock and Roll Years'. This article is about retirement.

Those who know me will tell you I have announced my intended retirement every year since I contracted cancer in 1999. Since then, I have observed the retirement of my personal doctor, surgeons, politicians and, of course, many close colleagues.

There are several things I have learned. If you love your work, then you never retire – you just do it for free. Also, we all change. I now have white hair and a wrinkly face. On the other hand, we don't change at all. I know the secret of youth is learning. I also know that to do nothing is not wasting time.

So, I have decided to 'retire' from writing my columns. This does not mean I may not return. I am indeed the Frank Sinatra of Education.

The responsibilities I have willingly undertaken were pushing me towards becoming mature and wise, qualities I have fought against all my life.

To put it another way, I want to live a long time. I just don't want to become 'aged'.

I have outgrown ambition, desire for power and the love of high position. That does not mean I am not ambitious. What it means is that I wish to be ambitious without the trappings of power and status. Money also means less and less to



► Les Walton: "I want to live a long time. I just don't want to become 'aged'"

me. In the words of Samuel Johnson, 'it is better to live a rich life than to die rich.'

The other good part of getting old is that you don't have to laugh at anyone else's jokes. It is no longer necessary.

There is one basic truth: educationalists can never retire. We will only stop learning when we stop living.

Over the years, I have attended many retirement parties. Bob Newhart, the American stand-up comedian, describes a retirement party in his 1960 album, the 'Button-Down Mind of Bob Newhart', still the 20th best-selling comedy album in history. An accountant, during his retirement speech, tells everyone he had to 'get half stoned every morning to get down to this crummy job. You put in 50 years and they give you this crummy watch – working out at 28 cents a year.'

He then announced that, if it hadn't been for the money he took out of petty cash, he wouldn't have got by. He also confirmed the rumours that he was going off with Miss Wilson, the cashier, who had just embezzled two hundred thousand bucks, 'who is down in Mexico', while he was 'up here with this crummy watch'.

He completed his speech by announcing he had some tapes of activities at office parties that he would sell for \$1500 each, 'though the June picnic may run at \$1575'.

I have mentioned some memorable leaving parties in my columns – Jack, the caretaker, and Bob, the former prisoner of war. I particularly

remember one I attended in a school in Newcastle, where the Headteacher announced that he could not have done any more for his school – except one thing: 'Get the children to learn and the teachers to teach.'

My favourite retirement party of all time was Charlie Smith's. Charlie was the most respected senior teacher across Gateshead. At work, Charlie was the professional's professional. I learned so much from him.

The biggest lesson was that, out of school, you could be yourself but in school you were playing the part of a teacher, with all the professional standards required by the job. When he occasionally joined us in the pub, he was a truly funny man. However, back at work the next day, he transformed into a dedicated and serious professional.

As a young 30-year-old teacher, I was very honoured to organise his retirement party. Because of the esteem in which he was held, the Director of Education, Member of Parliament and numerous dignitaries turned up. Charlie only asked one thing of me: 'Leave a gap of 15 minutes after the Director's speech.'

When the Director finished, I waited. Charlie, one of the quietest and most dignified men I had ever met, then winked at me. In that instance, Bubbles turned up. She wore nothing but balloons and a python draped around her neck. After asking the local MP to 'pop' her balloons, she draped the python around the neck of the Headteacher and danced out.

'Bloody hell, Charlie,' I whispered, 'you could have told me.' 'It's all right for you. I have to come to work tomorrow.' Charlie, wise as ever, whispered: 'Getting older doesn't mean you are getting old.'

May I thank my fan for your loyalty.

■ Les Walton CBE is chair of the Northern Education Trust.

**WE ONLY STOP LEARNING
WHEN WE STOP LIVING**

LES WALTON ON WHY IT'S GOODBYE...FOR NOW: PAGE 33

