The year of living sabatically.

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Sometimes, you have a chance to make a difference. To take the measure of a situation and effect real change.

The hiker who kicks aside —as they walk, almost without thinking or breaking stride — the rocks and branches that have fallen across their path does this in a minor way, but the imperative is the same: If you have the capacity, you have the responsibility.

I have lived my life by this credo. Blessed with great opportunity — a healthy mind and body, the good fortune to be born into a society and a part of the world that provided me a solid middle class upbringing, parents who loved and nurtured me, intelligence, a university education — I have indeed been very fortunate. Mother nature, my ancestors, *whomever* gave me a rich palette to work with... The Quid Pro Quo? Use it...

From the age of five onward, every morning without fail as I left for school, I was told by my mother: "Just remember, your name is Wendy Holm, and anything you want to do you can do..." Now to some, this may seem impertinent. Anything you want to do you can do? Surely not... But what my lovely mother meant, and what I understood her to mean, was that there were no borders to potential; it was simply a matter of focus and priority. I had a good head on my shoulders. It was up to me to use it.

I took that advice forward, carefully stowed in the bow of my life's boat as I navigated the waters of university, my journey to the west coast of Canada, a masters degree and a decade in Ottawa. When I returned to this Province in 1983, a Canadian of 8 years standing and my beautiful 3 year old daughter in tow, I set about building for us a life.

As a self-employed consultant, I enjoyed freedoms many parents do not, and I savoured it: it allowed me to spend time with my daughter according to her schedule. But it also provided me with the opportunity to do other things.

Enter pro bono.

I recall well the September afternoon in 1987 when I retrieved the Vancouver Courier from my front porch and the front page headline "Our H20 Soon in Tow" caught my eye. (About the same time, you will recall, that a Canadian delegation was to travel to Washington to sign the final text of the Free Trade Agreement.) I sat down at the kitchen table and read the story, by Vancouver journalist Craig Spence, and things began to connect.

(As a child spending summers in the Adirondack Mountains, I remember making the "activity books" last by doing the "connect the dots" puzzles in my mind, sans pencil. Fortunate practice, as it turned out, because understanding the ways in which the trade agreement stripped Canada of sovereignty over her water resources required one to connect many dots — the Free Trade Agreement, The General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade, The Harmonized Commodity Coding System of the GATT, the Explanatory Notes to the Harmonized Commodity Coding System of the GATT— to understand the picture it painted for our water resources.)

And so launched a three year pro bono involvement to raise the public profile of water's inclusion in the FTA and its implications for Canadian sovereignty and public policy. At minimum half my professional time. The publishing of (my first) book. A cross Canada tour. All accomplished in a balanced and professional way that made the label "anti-FTA" unstickable; allowing me to be

heard by those who for their own reasons supported other aspects of the Agreement. Was this easy for me to do as a single parent? Of course not. Did that stop me? Of course not... I understood why it was a problem. Others were not jumping forward to pick up the torch. I had a responsibility to do so. Not as a Pollyanna but as a Professional.

During the days leading up to the passage of the NAFTA, I was again heavily involved in the public discussion. Today the rubber is finally hitting the road: the Canadian government is being sued by a US company for close to $500 million under NAFTA's Chapter 11 (investor-state dispute mechanism, same as the MMT case) because the BC government had the temerity to place a moratorium and subsequent ban on water exports and, in doing so, constrain the "anticipated profits" of the US firm. Hopefully, Canadians are today better equipped to fight this because they squared off on the issue a decade ago and promises were made that politicians can now be held to.

In the past year, I have been repeatedly asked to jump back into the water export fray. And although I have answered the call to a limited extent (making submissions to parliamentary committees on water and the MAI, water and the WTO, attending meetings, responding to the media) I have only done so when I can link it to sustainable agriculture and the policy poverty in which Canada's farm communities are forced to exist: Sustainable agriculture is a fundamental pillar of community economic, social and environmental health. Yet without some major shifts in the thinking of politicians and consumers about sustainability as it relates to the production of the food we eat, BC's farm sector as we now know it will be gone in a decade.

Prior to visiting Cuba with my daughter on holidays in May 1998, I had for several years become interested in both Cuba and India as countries where I might "do my international work" — the professional "payback" for having had the opportunity to enjoy a long and productive career in Canada. When I went to Cuba and spoke with Ministry "Agronomos", I was taken by the striking similarity amidst our differences: BC and Cuban farmers, for totally different reasons, were both leaders in sustainable agriculture. How wonderful, I thought, an opportunity to "free two birds from one cage"...

Those who read this column know the rest. Twenty of our top farmers went down there in January and, as guests of the Cuban government, were given a 10 day five province tour of Cuba's LARGE (e.g. 6,000 ha) farming cooperatives. This August, a Delegation of 28 Cuban farmers, scientists and Agronomos, led by their Deputy Minister of Agriculture, will travel throughout the province visiting sustainable agriculture in BC's Fraser, Okanagan, Merrit, Kamloops, Armstrong, Peace River, Cariboo and Vancouver Island farming regions. And heavily profiling the public policy importance of same.

At a time when corporate concentration and creeping multi-national domination of our food supply is — or should be — of prime public policy concern, a project like this (offering new cooperative linkages between independent, sustainable producers in BC and Cuba) should have been easily supportable by government. But it wasn't.

What to do? I sensed this Project was — from a public policy standpoint — perhaps the most important one of my career. The Project that I wanted to hang my professional hat on as having helped accomplish. Yet for some reason, those who should be supporting it (principally the federal government and federal NGO's) were not.

So I chose to take this as my "Sabbatical Year", cash in all (five years worth) of my RRSP's, borrow from family and friends, and DO IT. Because, quite honestly, I could not walk by and leave it undone.

Others agree with its importance. In side discussions at a recent Conference on Cuba put on by The Economist magazine in Toronto, the BC-Cuba Farmer-to-Farmer project was described by Canada's former Ambassador to Cuba Mark Entwistle as "brilliant, this is exactly what it takes to make it work" because it recognizes the potential of Cuba *and frames it in a cooperative model...*

In closing, I greatly value the assistance of Corky Evans and the Ministry of Agriculture, CODEV, Farm Folk/City Folk, CAW, CUSO (who we will be pleased to have as our NGO for Phase Three - Capacity Building), and the many farmers, farmer cooperatives, farm organizations and credit unions in BC who have so generously responded to our call for funding for the return visit. And in particular those farmers who went down to Cuba in January and have worked hard to make the itinerary for the Cuban's return exchange a valuable and meaningful one in their regions.

In the search for public policy solutions that will deliver us to the medium term safely and "in good heart", I continue to believe that capacity implies responsibility. And though contrary to many conventional yardsticks (including those of my credit union manager!) there is no question in my mind — as an Agrologist and as a Canadian — that this year has been my most meaningful and successful yet.