

Back in January, I made what for me was a quite momentous decision to go on holiday for virtually two weeks over the Easter vacation because my husband had been offered the opportunity of a lecture trip and a conference in North America.

I made the decision not to organize any lectures or visits to conferences for myself partly because of the awkward timing – it included the Jewish Passover, which we wanted to celebrate in the traditional manner, and could do so if we visited family relatives.

We planned to stay with my only cousin, the daughter of my late father's brother, making it a rather special and nostalgic family-type of trip. I also planned to try and catch up on my knowledge of American education and social policy, an area I'd been particularly interested in until a few years ago and of which I'd made a special study. Nevertheless, the planning of this was rather desultory and I felt rather guilty about the prospects of such an amount of leisure. But I already had found the academic session rather tiring and anticipated that the rest of the spring term was not likely to be any less so.

The last time I'd made a decision to go on holiday at Easter time, two years ago, for a long weekend it had not been very successful because it was marred by a rather traumatic encounter with a member of my staff, on the day of the start of the trip itself. That memory continued to haunt me partly because the difficulties had continued and partly because, although the person was now leaving at the end of term, I anticipated some last-minute problems before being able to relax.

Despite these justifications for a longer break at Easter I continued to feel guilty about not attending the usual round of conferences. This feeling was made worse by the fact

Leaving guilt on Disney's doorstep

that two of my mature women post-graduate research students were presenting important papers at a conference with which I should have been associated.

Some of the guilt however was mitigated in discussion with one of them when we tried to plan a follow-up review meeting of the conference paper. I apologized for my absence and she, rather diffidently, also apologized for being away immediately after the conference. We then shared our plans for our "secret" trips and discovered to our amazement that we were to overlap for a day and a half in our trips to the same place, namely Disneyworld, Florida. We subsequently swapped addresses of motels/hotels and extremely tentatively arranged a possible social meeting on the mutual Thursday evening. I must say it slightly assuaged my guilt.

Subsequently in conversation with other colleagues I discovered that rather a lot of us had planned Easter holidays as a result of the rather austere winter and the two terms of continuing resource constraints that had taken their toll on all our working lives.

I packed our bags with a few work books and papers and set off with my

children to join my husband in Canada, visiting briefly some of his cousins as a prelude to our trip to Washington, my cousin's farm and the jaunt to Florida. By the time we reached Washington I'd abandoned any pretence at studying and absorbed myself in some novels, admittedly of the local cultural variety. I just about managed to keep up with the news, largely local to North America, and I felt very detached from things British or academic being in the bosom of ones family. Nevertheless it was all wonderfully familiar and strangely so given that it was seven or 10 years since I had made these kinds of visits, albeit that they had been quite lengthy study leaves and I had been to a couple of subsequent North American conferences.

By the time that I reached Florida, I was so detached from my work at the polytechnic in England and so absorbed in my nostalgic trip that I'd almost forgotten that my researcher was also to be in Disneyworld. The journey to Florida was in itself, in any event, rather eventful that I did not have much thought for anything else. We had to get up at four in the morning to get to the airport comfortably in time to deliver back a



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rented car at six and catch a seven-in-the-morning flight. The flight had been overbooked and we were not given seats until seconds before take-off so I was in no mood for sociability. I had also discovered that Florida's Disneyworld was not at all like the Californian Disneyland with which we had become familiar 10 years ago on study leave at the University of California, literally down the road.

In Florida a whole town is devoted to the industry and there are at least three separate centres to visit. The children chose the Epcot Center for that first day, it being a shorter day and the promise of Epcot less exciting than the "Magic Kingdom" itself. Standing in line for one of the more exciting "rides" – a kind of roller-coaster trip through the body in an imaginary "spaceship" – I heard a voice calling my name. And standing in the queue, about half-an-hour behind us (in terms of the ride itself) was my researcher. How extraordinary that in all the thousands, possibly

millions, of people there we should actually bump into one another. The Disney theme tune (which is also the theme music for one of the popular rides, which my children had so enjoyed 10 years ago) had become literally true – It's a small world after all.

That continued to be true for the rest of the trip. When I returned to Washington to meet up with my husband after his conference I began to think again about more intellectual things and started to read the *Washington Post* more vigorously.

Two editorials turned out to be apposite and put me in the mood for my return. One was on black student enrolments in higher education in the United States and the other on the balance between teaching and research in higher education. The former sounded a different note from what appear to be the issues in England. It was a comment on the declining black student enrolments and the importance of trying to reverse that trend, especially by the injection of greater resources.

The latter article was more similar to British current issues in higher education. It was about the fact that there ought to be better measures of teaching quality as opposed to research and publishing by which to measure scholarship in academic life. This editorial, on my last day in the US, devoted most of its comments to a report just published by my fellow columnist, Ernest Boyer.

When I'd told my daughter what I planned to write about in this column she'd told me that it was not right to discuss my plans for leisure rather than work because people might consider me a "sickie", someone who delights in taking sick leave. Being able to square the circle by giving evidence of really up-to-date American trends in higher education makes me feel that this is now not the case.