Stop the law, I want to get off

After more than twenty years in practice, commercial lawyer Peter Schell is following his heart and his art, reports IAN BAKER.

Interviewed in her 70th year for the *Paris Review*, the American author Katherine Anne Porter expounded on the mechanics of vocation. "It is my firm belief," she declared, "that all our lives we are preparing to be somebody or something, even if we don't do it consciously. And the time comes one morning when you wake up and find that you have become irrevocably what you were preparing all this time to be.

"Lord, that could be a sticky moment if you had been doing the wrong things, something against your grain."

It is a proposition you can imagine Peter Schell endorsing. Twenty years' legal practice hasn't knocked the romanticism out of this Sydney solicitor who has stepped aside from his sure professional path to follow a passion.

Far from it. Late last year Schell told his partners at the George Street firm Cutler Hughes & Harris that he wanted a year's break. To paint, he said. Yes, oils, canvases, that sort of thing. Art.

And by the time you read this, the 43-year-old specialist in commercial litigation expects to have explained to his former colleagues that he is unlikely to ever come back.

"It's a very good firm, very decent people. And they have the right ethic and integrity. So my decision to leave the law has nothing to do with Cutler Hughes," says Schell, whose professional history includes six years at the NSW Bar and a two year stint (1991–93) as senior corporate prosecutor with the Commonwealth Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

"I moved around a bit," he says of his legal career, "because basically I wanted to experience more in the law than most people wanted to. I wanted to broaden my range, particularly as a litigator. But apart from that, it was quite conventional.

"I never found the law particularly creative. And that's probably why I'm doing what I'm doing. [The law is] terribly rigid. There's very little scope for any truly innovative thinking or self-expression.

"And so while you get an enormous buzz out of winning a case . . . it is a very contained environment.

"You're really now running a business. The products are legal cases. It's not as it used to be where you were fundamentally a lawyer attempting to assist somebody who had a problem.

"That's why there's so much disenchantment within the law. There's a huge amount of it."

"Something gnaws at you," Schell tells you, describing a dissatisfaction with his professional life that began about a decade ago. "It's saying look, this is very satisfactory in some respects . . . but it's not really – my heart's not in it.

"But you let those things sit. There's nothing much you can do about it at the time, because you've got other commitments and you are doing things and you've got partners to consider – a whole range of things tends to work against you being able to concentrate on even thinking through those issues.

"So I think they sort of sit in there and bubble up occasionally. And then you say, well these feelings aren't going to go away so I'd better do something about it."

In 1993 he began to take evening drawing classes and is now at the Julian Ashton Art School in Sydney's Rocks – developing an activity he had pursued since childhood but in which he had never been trained, even at school. The night classes led to weekend classes, the drawing to painting. Schell found that the more he did, and the more he learned, the more powerfully he was drawn to a yet deeper involvement.

What had people said when he'd told them of his plan to spend a year painting? "Actually, most people," he recalls, "those I spoke to about it, said: 'What a bloody great idea . . . I wish I could paint, or I wish I could do something else, but I've got nothing else that I am able to do.'

"But – not necessarily at Cutler Hughes – but some people looked at me as if to say: 'You've got rocks in your head'. You know: 'The poor bugger's gone mad!'"

If there is a veneer of diffidence in Schell's carefully modulated tones, it restrains torrents of enthusiasm. Clearly he is getting a tremendous kick out of having had little more to do for the past six months than paint and draw, though how much of this is due to the novelty of his situation and how much to the joy of self-expression is difficult to determine.

Schell attributes his present deep feelings of well-being in great part to the latter.

He has not planned his change of career particularly carefully, he says, though he has managed to sock away a small sum against a needy day.

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"Fortunately I've got a wife who works and is very supportive of what I'm doing. If I didn't have her support . . . I'd have to be washing dishes; that's what it would come to."

Schell's wife, Helen Conway, is also a lawyer, holding the post of general counsel and group secretary at the NRMA.

He has one son, Robert, aged 12, from a previous marriage, and is pleased to have more time available to spend with him.

"Essentially it's been Helen saying 'Look, you go for it and see how it all goes.' And so she's really supported the undertaking. [But] even if we were struggling and I had to get another job, I'd do it."

He has no illusions, he says, about the difficulty of succeeding commercially as an artist. Nor any particular timetable for doing so.

"It's not simply a matter of me saying I'll win the Archibald in three years and that's my goal and I'm working to that. Sure, if that was possible it'd be fabulous.

"But I just don't think you can be a painter or an artist, if that's the sole reason for being there. Or say that you are a failure unless you're achieving those things as a painter.

"Because you've only got to look at art history and it will tell you that that's not right.

"It's basically a life of poverty and obscurity as an artist, and unless you're prepared to endorse that, and try to offset it or overcome it in some way amidst the uncertainty of the future . . . if you're not prepared to at least take the risk that that will happen, forget it." ◻

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