



Word shed: A self-portrait taken in December 2020, in my tin hut, a relocatable clad inside and out with wood.

Final word on my last word

This is just to say the gap I've filled in your Saturday paper for the last few years will no longer be occupied by my random thoughts. I'm stepping away.

I'm not sure I want to go, and there's no pressure from the editor, the ever-patient Matt Rilkoff. But I've always believed it's best to depart from a job before someone else decides your time is up.

I recall an editor in Auckland who wrote one column too many. Encroaching dementia muddled his words, but nobody had the courage to tell him. It was a shock to realise such a widely respected figure in journalism had lost his superb grasp of the language.

My words still come, but there are pauses occasionally as the right one eludes. I'm sometimes rescued by the synonym key in Microsoft Word. Names are more difficult.

There are reliable backups - Lin, who listens with her critical ear when I read a column aloud, and a wonderful team at the *Taranaki Daily News*, who pick up slips in grammar, spelling, punctuation and good taste. A special thanks to them all.

When then-editor Ryan Evans asked me to write a column back in 2016, I was unsure. I'd spent a long career writing news in as neutral a way as I could manage,

and even when I was an editor I rarely attempted opinion editorials, leaving that special territory to experts.

It turned out to be surprisingly easy, as though I'd been storing up strong opinions and mild outrage for decades and the right brain had been itching to get started in setting the world to rights.

I have little idea if its outpourings have made much difference, but judging by the number of community groups that invite me to speak there must have been some impact.

As an aside, I'm unsure how some of those occasions went down. There would be polite applause and sometimes a few brave souls would venture over for polite conversation. But usually there would be a rush to the morning tea table, leaving me thinking I'd left a dry taste.

My columns (239 of them) covered a wide range of topics, always with a strong sense of pride in Taranaki. Whether I was writing about what soap to use in the shower, Pukekura Park, or the machinations of local government, I wanted to convey a message that we live in one of the great places of the world. Because we do.

I've travelled plenty and have no desire to be anywhere but here. I don't even have an interest in going elsewhere in New Zealand, such are the risks of driving. That's not old age talking, but contentment with this place, and admiration for you lot.

I'm not retiring from writing. There are still books to get done, including my memoirs, which have progressed lately after I put them aside three years ago when work got busy. This year. Maybe.

The word count has topped 110,000 and I'm only up to 1995, so the grandkids face a long obligatory read at some time in the future.

I sometimes wonder where the words come from. An inadequately labelled "big read" I once churned out for *Metro* magazine reached 78,000 before I was forced to attack it with my own red pen. It went to editor Warwick Roger a mere 15,000, but he wanted "only" 12,000. His edit ruined it, but that was my fault.

As a child and teenager I was shy, so perhaps what I'm producing these days is the result of some massive buildup in a hyperactive mind.

My favourite column? The one about the man who built his kids a treehouse in one of Victoria Rd's venerable puriri, presenting the council with an awful dilemma. Most significant? Pushing for a Māori ward. The biggest reaction came from the one about a church group pitching its wares in Pukekura Park.

I suspect the art of the column lies within my curiosity about how life's simple things actually work. And then finding the right words.

Words, words, words. Nothing but words. But on those occasions when I managed to arrange them effectively they had a bit to say for themselves.

Now, at least Lin won't have to put up with me ending every second conversation with "there might be a column in that..."

Thanks for reading this far.

FOOTNOTE: *I'm no longer signing myself with "JT". Now it's "PT" – Papa T. Grandchildren. You know what I'm talking about.*