

LEARNING AND CHANGING

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One of my first teachers was my older sister. As with all the great teachers, her lessons were riveting. She told me, for instance, about the queen going to the toilet in her ermine robes. I am haunted even now by the difficulty of keeping the ermine out of the way.

My sister 'did' Charles Dickens at school: *Hard Times*. She passed on to me the image of pupils as little pitchers having facts poured into them. By that time I was not such a little pitcher myself, and I understood, with Dickens and my sister, that education should be more than facts. Later, in many sleepy afternoon history classes, I learned that an invisible film prevented any facts from being poured into my own head. The teacher tried, but the facts just slipped uselessly away at the edges. As a result, in the fullness of time, I found myself sitting my final university history exam, unable to remember anything about the Turks at the gates of Vienna, except that they brought with them coffee and lilac. Or was it lavender? And was it the end of the sixteenth, or the seventeenth century? And which is which anyway?

Nevertheless, the university gave me a BA and I emerged into a world in the throes of social upheaval. It was the early 1970s, and I learned a great deal in a short space of time as we attempted, euphorically, to re-invent absolutely everything. We were not the first generation to attempt this, of course. Nor the last, I hope. But ours was a particularly full-blooded attempt.

I learned from hippy communes and political activism. I helped end the Vietnam war, and saw Gough Whitlam in and out. I taught English overseas, learning

a great deal more than I taught. I moved on to the turbulence of lesbian feminism, women's households, collectives, women's land, separatism and multiple relationships (as a systematic principle, rather than an ad hoc mess, though sometimes they felt the same). It was very educational. Re-inventing absolutely everything turned out to be more difficult than we had thought.

In my 30s, after a decade of work in political and community organisations, I underwent some sort of mental spasm, or catharsis (or perhaps just an overwhelming longing for orderliness) and went back to Uni to study accountancy. I returned to the straight workforce in a high-rise building with a lift that was annoyed if you stood too close to its doors, and an office door that wouldn't open unless you keyed in the right numbers. The shock was profound. I cried every night for weeks. I had rather over-estimated the pleasure of orderliness. In any case, I soon discovered that these grey fortresses are not as orderly as they appear (a fact worth remembering when one is up against them). The human capacity for creating chaos, while seeking order, is infinite, particularly where money is concerned. This is true everywhere, from the local bowls club to the hospital with thousands on the payroll.

During this period of my life I learned something invaluable. Deep within what I would once have regarded as enemy territory, I met lovely people, ordinary people doing their best to make sense of life. I made friends. And I liked some aspects of my work. Double-entry book-keeping, invented by the Venetian monk Pacioli in the fifteenth century (or was it the sixteenth?), and still in use in twenty-first century computers, is beautiful. It is a system as satisfyingly poised as the best poem, a perpetual balance.

By this time I was doing a lot of counselling, which made sense of some of the impediments (in myself and others) to changing absolutely everything. Listening to

people is the surest way to understand what makes them tick.

At present I am a university student (again), and teaching first year undergraduates, which is fun. I learn (again) at least as much as I teach. I am hugely appreciative of what the universities provide: the space, the financial and intellectual support, the discipline, the encouragement, the commitment to language and ideas, and above all the libraries. These are precious things in a time of deep political conservatism.

But my first commitment, my political allegiance, has always been to the small local ways in which humans support and learn from each other: the community groups, special interest groups, writers' groups, book groups, self-help groups, performance groups, discussion groups; the political lobbies, the trade unions, the professional associations. As a member, I have seen that the Writers' Centre combines the best of all of these, and more.

Through the political vicissitudes of the last forty years I have never lost my belief that if things are to change, if the world is to be a better place, then it will not be the big institutions that make it happen. It will be a community process, grass-roots up. It will be groups of people linked together by intangible bonds: the common purpose, the hours and hours of voluntary work, the successes, the ructions and debates, the social get-togethers, the downs, the ups. A very human balance, worthy of Pacioli: beautiful, indestructible.