

Hugh Greenway reflects on the painful lessons of a dreadful year

The beginning of a new year is often the time to pause and reflect. Leaving aside the fact that, as I write, it's early December and I haven't even managed to do the Christmas shopping yet, I thought, in a delightfully circular fashion, that for this column I would reflect upon reflection.

Those who have read more than one of my articles for *TJ* or who occasionally dip into my blog will have realised that I only really have one idea about learning. And it is this: reflective practice is what it's all about.

I tend to divide the world into two groups of people: those who will entertain the possibility that they might be wrong and those I'm not really interested in wasting time on. The latter group are beyond help in the most part so I'd rather spend my efforts on those who pause to think.

Two thousand and nine was a pretty dreadful year for me but one in which I learned a lot. In May, my wife Jelena died after fighting cancer for 11 years. A fortnight or so after her death, I took a risk and blogged about what I had learned in the 13 years we had been together.

The strange thing for me was that it turned out not to be a risk at all. Before posting my reflections on my lessons from Jelena, I agonised about whether it was acceptable to bring something so personal and private into the public and professional sphere. I worried that it might be seen as vulgar or inappropriate.

It turns out that the more personal and direct I get on my blog and in my writings, the more other people engage and respond. So, in the spirit of Christmas and New Year repeats, I thought I would revisit the things I learned from my late wife.

Jelena's lessons:

- Persistence tends to trump talent
- The English (and I mean the English, not the British) have got their attitudes to friendship completely arse about face – we are nicest to strangers and rudest to our closest friends. As a result, we often doubt that we are loved and therefore lack sufficient confidence to take risks in life

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- Whatever you do, take some risks. They don't have to be big ones but, if you don't take any, you won't learn anything new
- Passion is a good thing. I remember Jelena jumping up and down with glee and clapping the first time she provoked me to red-faced rage. That was the point where she believed there was hope for me
- Anger is not a bad thing. Particularly if you recognise it, accept it and deal with it
- Curiosity is perhaps the most underrated virtue in the world. People who ask questions learn things and are remembered by those of whom they ask
- Cultivate those who love you. Ignore those who don't. Otherwise you'll waste your time on people who are not going to help you much
- Don't accept being taken for granted. Challenge people if you think you have been short-changed
- Make sure that those you love know you love them. It is the best chance you can give them in life

On revisiting these, I don't think I want to change any. But I would add this thought on pain: Pain is not necessarily a bad thing and the absence of it is not necessarily a good thing. We learn from it and it lessens with time. The tale becomes more bearable with the telling.

In Jelena, I had a fan who gave me the confidence not to worry about what people thought of me. This confidence, acquired over years of her support, enabled me to try more, fail more and learn more. I am now genuinely happy to be wrong because it usually means I have learned something.

My wife made a learner out of me and that is what teaching is all about.

Reflection does not have to be a difficult thing. It is as simple as asking yourself 'what have I learned today?' ■

