

people. From the buildings that had collapsed, shreds of curtains waved from the rubble.

I'd been accepted at El Colegio de México, which had the first Women's Studies program in Latin America. It is an elite, almost entirely postgraduate institution; the only undergraduate degree is in international relations, where the diplomatic corps is trained.

What an interesting group of women were in this Women's Studies unit — not feminists in the way I understood the term at that time, but fascinated by women writers, as I was. I met many of these writers, which was marvellous, and some of them I corresponded with for years afterward. It was a very intellectually exciting couple of years and very challenging because I still had a young child to care for as well. (The older ones were already adults at university themselves.) I had job offers from Mexico and the US at the end of my stay, but at that time Mexico City was so very polluted I didn't think I was justified in keeping my son any longer in that environment. I certainly didn't want to go to the U.S. because I had loathed their foreign policies ever since I lived in Cuba and saw what had happened to those in Central and South America because of those policies.

So back in Sydney again, I had the most wonderful and enchanting 16 months writing up my doctoral thesis.

**Would that have been one of the profound events that shaped you?**

Probably the most profound thing that happened to me was to meet Jonno actually. The most interesting man I've ever known which is why I am not with a man now. I've known some lovely men but in terms of being interesting none could compare. Now I don't want to spend the rest of my life with anybody. I was thirty-two and he was thirty-five when he died.

**What are your feelings about death?**

I'm not the least bit afraid of death. Dying can be a bloody pain literally, but I like the cycle of life, I like the seasons which is why I live here. And it pleases me to go back into the earth. I want to be buried here standing up or wherever I drop. I don't believe in an afterlife or a higher being. I believe in connections between humans and the earth.

There are two things that make me who I am, I think. The first is that I think you make your own contentment in life, it has nothing to do with your surroundings or what happens to you. We all go through similar experiences in life, and they can make you stronger, even if distressing you for a time. But I wake every morning with gratitude and look out the window and hear the birds and think I am the most privileged person on earth. I've thought that for a very long time.

Partly I was pushed into this position because I had to deal with kids growing up, and do it alone, which is hard. But it also dates from when Jonno died, and I adopted this attitude consciously. I decided to look positively at the world because I had this beautiful young child who was so happy and giggled all the time, delighted by sunshine, splashing water. It was an obligation at first and is now my automatic response. I am in love with life, in all its forms, and this makes me contented, every day. I wrote a book about Jonno's dying and published it. That helped a lot through my grieving.

**Tell me about your feelings of connection with the earth?**

Well I think we are absolutely crazy not to acknowledge that we all have this connection in some form or other. I



also think you have a particular place and environment that is yours, in which you are comfortable.

I know where mine is. It's not this particular one, I don't particularly like granite country. Mine is further west, it's inland, Not quite where I grew up — though I keep returning to my birthplace — but it is right under my skin.

It can be many places within Australia but it's the same kind of country, it's the semi-arid country, that's my place. I described my recognition of it once: when I go over the crest of the hill out of Port Augusta in South Australia, heading north to Alice Springs, my heart opens. That's the only way I can describe it. It literally does. It's a physical thing, I can feel it open with the surging joy that tells me: I'm back. Home. That's where I first noticed this but I don't have to go that far anymore for this to happen. Even north or west of Cowra I feel this.

I also adore the sky in Australia. I could not live in England, it nearly busted me the ten months I was there on and off — it felt very grim. I adore the Nullarbor, it is just so beautiful, with its huge sky. I like to see a long way to the horizon. It's an invitation, isn't it? It's one of the reasons I go travelling. I need to go back and be nurtured. Braidwood is not really my place but it has lovely people and of course it is close to quite a lot of my small immediate family, and my mum who is nearly 94 is just three hours away.

**So tell me about your relationship with your mum?**

Well, there was a period of my life from about 14 when I thought she was really stupid and didn't know anything. I was a really nasty little so and so, unkind and selfish. I regret it because it wasn't until I reached full adulthood that I began to appreciate who she was. She had little formal education and I was quite snobby about education, with no good reason.

I was given the gift of a good brain, just as others have been given the gift of beauty or sporting skill or excellence in golf (dammit!), but I didn't do anything to earn this brain. Mum didn't have the opportunities that I did, many of which she gave me, but she knows a lot of stuff I don't know and she's a far better cook. And a terrific prize-winning golfer.

**Was she a major influence in your life?**

Oh yes. Mainly as something I wasn't going to be, initially. She was a very warm and loving person but as I saw it, she pandered to my dad. Now I know she was just being clever, she would say yes and then go do what she wanted to do anyway. At the time I'd think, don't let him get away with this, that or other. You know — a school teacher, and male; he was a very good teacher, but authoritarian. But Mum is a resilient woman, tremendously competent, and conducts her life like a pro these days. I admire her immensely.

**It is important for you to keep busy? To use your brain?**

I like to use my brain certainly, I do cryptic crosswords and I read at least five books a week. I've done that since I was a very little girl. It's my favourite thing to do because you can go into another world by reading, so that whatever is happening in your world you can escape, throw off. It gets you through things I think. I walk a lot, do yoga, play golf

regularly, and in summer swim laps, three mornings a week at 6 am.

**So what do you plan for the next twenty years?**

Well, I still think I have some writing in me. A lot of people keep urging me to put together the journal I write on my travels. I send it off to about forty people, friends and relatives. I drove around Australia by myself a couple of years ago. I go off regularly in my campervan for a month or three, and I sent forty thousand words back from that big trip. Anyway it's all sitting there and I should probably work on that.

**So, what advice would you give to younger women about how to get through life when it's tough?**

Take risks! Try. Think it through. People think I do things impulsively but I don't at all. I think about things for a long time. Then the moment comes and I think now it's time, or I think I am never going to do that so let that one go. For many years, I also made five year plans. I'd sit down with pen and paper and ask myself where do I want to be in five years time? Work out where that was and what I wanted to have done.

That's how I've managed to lose a husband (and many friends to death), raise three kids, do a doctorate, write a novel, carry various jobs, do voluntary work of a range of kinds — all these things at the same time. It's a way to get through troubles. Will I feel like this in a month, will I feel like this in six months, will this matter in a year? Five years? You continue until you can say if it isn't going to matter then, why not save yourself the worry right now and stop worrying over things you can't do anything about? You'll make mistakes, you won't learn anything if you don't, forgive yourself and allow others to forgive you too.

**A lot of woman are terrified of getting older...**

Dance! Sing! Skip down the street! Smile at everybody! When you get up in the morning and you feel miserable, go out walking with a big smile on your face, greet absolutely everyone you see and pretty soon you won't feel miserable at all and you might have made three or four other people a lot happier by having such a beautiful smile to take on their way. It works! It works a treat!

Or go and play golf because when you look at that ball sitting there, you can imagine it is the last bugger who bothered you, and as you swing into a resounding thwack! that carries a beautiful shot to the green. You can think, "good riddance! you [insert your own word here], you're GONE!"

**Any last thing you'd like to pass on?**

Yes, yes. The quality I most value in others, and I didn't always think this, I used to sneer about it a bit, is kindness. So be kind. Even when you don't want to, put yourself out for others and be kind. Stop your car when you see someone in trouble by the side of the road, don't drive past. Just small kindnesses. If you notice someone isn't coming out much as usual, go knock on the door and see if there is anything wrong. Make them a pie or do the shopping for them, anything, because there are a lot of older people in this town and a lot of us live alone. Greet them as you walk by, don't act like you're in Sydney.

The other thing is I am super conscious of my faults. Some I don't seem to be able to do much about, like things just keep bursting out my mouth. So a piece of wisdom I could pass on to younger people is, don't always say what you have just thought. Wait a bit. It might come out more kindly.

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