



AS I GROW OLDER...

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As I grow older, I wonder frequently about what learning is, what it really means, what it really means to me, as a person.

I can say I have learnt a lot about technology recently. I'm proud of that - I don't find it comes easily. My adult children are amazed that I occasionally know more about something than they do! 'How did you learn about that?'

they ask. Possibly more important than the actual learning of how to use blogs and wikis and portals and flipcams and Facebook and Youtube and the multitude of free technologies online... is the understanding of how they can help me in my life and work; what can I do with them? What do they afford that is different? And the answer is, a lot; and I recognise and rejoice in that fact, knowing that in my old age I will be able to stay connected with the world, with friends, with family, in ways that have not been available to previous generations.

Such experiences can be easily recognised as 'learning'. I take something new; I become more skilled in its use; the more I learn, the easier new learning becomes because I can see similarities and connections; I understand the application of that learning to new contexts; I recognise my own development and how I can support others in developing.

I sometimes struggle with this learning, but I know how it works, I am an experienced and reasonably good learner. I have done it all my life; I have confidence in the process (though I'm inevitably 'learning' that my memory is not quite as sharp as it was).

But there are other kinds of learning processes that I have less confidence with, that are less routine. I'm not sure they are even 'learning'. But I don't know what else to call them.

On this day of writing, it is the birthday of my children's father. For many, this would be a day of celebration; for my family, a sad and poignant day. He is no longer here to celebrate with us. You might now ask - 'So what has this to do with learning, or with development?' That, perhaps, is my question to you, as you read this account.

A pleasant weekend family meal with friends: the phone rings. My son answers. In the single, ashen-faced word 'Mum', I know there is something seriously wrong. Heart attack... cycling with friends... sudden... air ambulance... pub... 60s... too late. The sheer animal scream of my daughter will haunt me forever. But in that single moment of shock, I learnt

that I could recognise the nuance of voice and expression in my son, that I had an inexplicable closeness. I learnt too, that my children would respond in such different ways: one with calm, clear-headedness, the other with an unearthly howl. I learnt that I would be un-nerved by both. In a split second I also learnt that I would be able to cope, I knew that the closeness of our relationship would deepen, that we would all be able to cope, in our different ways.

I have used the word 'learnt' in this account, because it is the word that comes naturally, but I could have used other words, such as 'recognised' or 'knew' or 'acknowledged'. But to me, I believe this experience gave me the deepest experience of learning that I can imagine. I learnt about myself and I learnt about my children. I learnt that I could think on my feet, in the most unexpected of circumstances, in a state of shock. And I continue learning from this experience, alongside my children, as they create lives for themselves that are in so many ways a reaction to this death. I had to learn that I would be deeply affected in a way I could never have anticipated, even two years on. My son left his well-paid job to follow his love and to live in New Zealand for a while - I think he learnt that you must live life while you have it. My daughter decided, with much heart-wrenching, to train as a GP: something long in her mind, but she learnt that this really should be her vocation. Both examples sound trite, but I know them to be heartfelt responses.

Such experiences are maybe less easily recognised as 'learning' in the conventional sense. Unlike the technology example, I cannot keep building on my experience. I do not think I will be better prepared in the future; I do not have confidence in the learning process. It is an emotional journey, emotional learning, forced upon me unexpectedly; and I have developed as a person because of it. Somehow it gives me a deeper sense of humanity and what it means to be human. This is not the same as learning about technology (though my relationship with technology is sometimes extremely emotional as I swear at the computer for its failings)! Technology gives me skills that I can describe and measure; I am largely in control of what I learn and what I want to learn; I could be tested on my learning.

So the question remains: is something that has by far the greater impact on my deepest feelings, my 'inner' being, appropriately characterised as 'learning'. No-one would wish to test me on this learning, but it has changed the ways I behave, the ways I think, the ways I interact with people, the ways I appreciate the world around me. Strangely, this is also what technology achieves, though in such a different way. Technology does not impinge on my inner being, but it does change the ways in which I think, behave, interact and appreciate the world.

So, I ask, is this the meaning or the very purpose of learning, whatever form it takes... to enable us to think differently, to shift our perceptions and understandings, and to allow us to grow as individuals and as members of the human race?