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Marika's Column

by Marika Jackson

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Marika Jackson

As another Christmas looms, I approach it with quite different feelings of anticipation and expectation than I did in past years. As parent and grandparent to a number of children, my festive involvement was, for decades, almost entirely focussed on immediate family.

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A delight always, despite the inevitable tensions raised by the need to get it 'right' in the traditional Victorian sense and the almost inevitable adult slide downhill propelled by a combination of fatigue and alcohol at the end. The main objective, as far as I was concerned, has always been the imparting of magic and joy for the delight of the youngest family members.

Over the last few, seasons, however, as I've moved away, a number of them have also distanced themselves. My lifestyle has taken what some of them regard as somewhat too 'colourful' a turn.

Besides, my involvement has inevitably, for better or worse, become less direct, as they grow up and I become less energetic. I hate to admit it but I don't think I'm wrong in sensing that they tend to regard me kindly still but, nevertheless, more as a benevolent old neighbour who likes to drop in for a bit of festive cheer when it's on offer but has the good grace not to hang around for too long afterwards.

So, when my dear friend Joanne suggested we could launch her 'beaut' new kitchen by arranging a Christmas lunch as an opportunity of bringing together her sons and their partners and my son with his young family, I jumped at the idea.

Joanne and I had been introduced to each other's offspring individually but none of them had yet met with each other socially. When we commenced transition, I in 2008, and Joanne in 2010, these were the children, and their partners, who stood by us when others found it just too hard.

I think it fair to say that it was the knowledge of their unwavering support that sustained us in those darker moments of feeling that what we'd done would alienate us from many social opportunities in the future.

Quite silly really, but I'm sure these were feelings that many reading this would have shared, at some time or other.

It's not long ago that my days were nothing more than a crushing bore, exacerbated by the bitter pill of having lost my beautiful studio with its regular stream of interested visitors.

As things have turned out, the reverse has become the reality. Sure, there are occasional days when, waking up in the morning, the realisation that I've no commitments other than perhaps a few housekeeping chores or a little grocery shopping is a rare but pleasant relief. Most of my days now are full and, more often than not, once again spent in the delightful company of various friends of one kind or another.

In early October I accepted an invitation to take part in a three day 'Women's Retreat' in the Blue Mountains. It was organised by the Metropolitan Community Church with some generous financial support from LINC (Lesbians Incorporated).

Although I've always identified as an avowed agnostic, the pastor and members of M.C.C. (Sometimes referred to as the 'Gay Church') have, without reservation, made me feel welcome whenever I've accompanied my Christian friend Joanne to Sunday Services etc., as well as to a number of social functions. I've also, incidentally, been well received by Joanne's Rotary Club friends, but more about that later.

The Retreat was wonderful and something I will always remember for the warmth of its embracing honesty and spiritual depth. I came away feeling uplifted, nourished and profoundly grateful for the privilege of having found myself in the company of so many inspirational people.

It got me thinking about how, in the maelstrom of everything that has happened to me over the last few years, there has been little

space for reflection on higher things.

With that in mind, I set my mind to unpacking the thought processes that so indispose me to ever accepting that it's possible for any human being to be even remotely capable of understanding, let alone defining, what it is that drives the universe, the thing generally referred to as 'God'.

As an agnostic I do recognise that there has to be something at the heart. The engine, if you like. Whatever it is, I'm in awe but understand that it's beyond human comprehension. You will be surprised, no doubt, when I tell you that I have occasionally 'prayed' to it, but only by way of an internalised recognition.

My new-found respect for the M.C.C. is simply based on their acceptance of me without reservation, despite the fact that I've made no secret of my challenging spiritual convictions or of my transgender and lesbian status. They, broadly, share my belief that every individual has the potential to develop a personal awareness of, and relationship with, whatever it is that drives everything.

To impose one's beliefs upon others is contemptuous of this potential and highly offensive. Experience tells me that such behaviour is invariably based on a perverse need to dominate or control other human beings and is particularly reprehensible when it's applied to the vulnerable such as the elderly, the recently bereaved or the intellectually disadvantaged.

The notion of respect for all life, human or otherwise and without exception is, I believe, one shared by all people of conscience, and is not the exclusive preserve of formalised religion.

I believe that consideration of any person as inferior because of race, education, religion, social position, politics, age, gender, sexual preference, intellect, physical condition etc. has to be strenuously resisted.

As I sat writing this article, the death of Nelson Mandela, was announced on the A.B.C. news (it's Friday, 6th December). Although his passing has been expected for quite some time now, ever since he was admitted to hospital, his sudden end because of a lung infection has, nevertheless, stunned me to a degree that I could not have anticipated. I had to stop writing and allow a few moments to compose myself emotionally.

As well as the enormity of the loss of this great man to the world, it's more than a little unnerving that the demise of this perfect exemplar of the sentiments expressed above would be announced at just this moment. Food for thought.

By the time you read this, I hope to have come through legal proceedings I initiated against an individual in early September on the grounds of sexual vilification and threats of violence.

I can't, however, share any of the details with you at this point because the case is still before the courts. It should be completed prior to the next Polare edition due in April.

Whatever the outcome, I hope to be able to share it with you then because the situation is one that some of you may also be confronted with some day.

It was very tempting to let the whole incident pass in the knowledge that the necessary legal processes can be painful, tedious and stressful.

Upon reflection, however, I realised that legal action was the only way to send a strong message that discrimination of any kind is reprehensible and punishable by law.

This is especially relevant when the offence is accompanied by actual, or threats of, violence. To do nothing about it would simply encourage the same line of behaviour again and again, if not towards me, towards someone else.

So, whatever the outcome, I think it's the message that is important, not just to the individual charged, but also to their social peers who are likely to be of a similar racist or homophobic mindset. (birds of a feather).

As many of you already know, I have a small one-bedroom apartment on the Central Coast where I spend most of my time. Between three to five days out of every fortnight, however, are spent with my friend Joanne in Sydney.

Consequently, I have been invited to accompany her to a number of pre-Christmas events in and around the city. One such event is to be a dinner with Joanne's Rotary Club friends and colleagues at a local golf club a few days before Christmas.

I've met with many of them during other social get-togethers previously and I've always been well received as her partner even to the extent that a couple who will be travelling to Europe for a month or so in 2014, have offered me their lovely house and garden in a quiet part of the city as a writer's retreat during their absence. I've accepted because, not only will it be an opportunity to get down to some serious writing, it will also be a chance to catch up with several friends I've been neglecting.

An added bonus will be the lovely old dog left in my care. I love dogs, and have had several over the course of my life.

Anyway, at the dinner I will probably drink more than I should as I invariably do, in the knowledge that Joanne will be driving me home safely. My point in telling you this is twofold. Firstly as kudos to Joanne for being such a responsible friend who will never drink and drive, but also as a reminder to you all to stay safe and out of trouble over the festive season.

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