



CONVERSATIONS

The joy of going back to school

Emma Freud finds happiness by learning for the sake of it

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Among the classes Emma took was a three-month painting course in Fairfax

In 2022 my family and I moved to Los Angeles for a year because of work. The only person without a job was me: I was about to turn 60 and keen to dive into the next chapter of my life. If only I could work out what it was going to be ...

After a few weeks of miserable soul searching it dawned on me that I had been giving it out for 40 years and genuinely needed something incoming. I had interviewed famous folk, fundraised for Comic Relief till my nose had literally turned red, worked on 17 movies and spent 26 years as a mum, and my tank was close to empty. I needed to stop transmitting and learn something new. So I decided to go back to college. As I wasn't looking for a diploma or certificates, I made up my own curriculum — my dream education, a juicy mixture of online university extension courses and in-person classes. None of them needed entry qualifications, some were free.

I enrolled for long courses on climate change and American politics at UCLA Extension, shorter courses at the universities of Edinburgh and Oregon covering racism and sustainability, and rounded them off with the brilliant black history course from MasterClass, where I was taught by actual Angela Davis and Cornel West.

I realised with glee that I could just make up what I wanted to learn because nobody was judging me except me, and ... I wasn't judging. So I also took a class in carpentry with power tools in downtown LA (made a chopping board), beekeeping in Glendale (didn't get stung), a three-month painting course in Fairfax (still can't paint), and How to Grow Vegetables at a community garden in Thai Town (resulting in tiny but miraculous tomatoes).

American Sign Language on Zoom sadly defeated me — but then I discovered the thrills of travelling the world inside my laptop ... I made mozzarella with a chef in Florence, smoked food with cowboys in Colorado and learnt how to prevent dementia — although I don't remember much of it. The year was game-changing. I'm a lot more curious than I was and my children wince less when I talk because I know more than I used to about their world of knowledge.

My tank is filling up — not with certificates but with the exquisite, unexpected joy of listening again and learning again. I'm still not quite sure what begins at 60, but whatever it is, I think it may now be landing on tilled and ready soil.