

The lesson learned as another year flies by

JOHN STURROCK

"WELL Grandad, that's another year gone by," said the youngster, who seemed to have an appreciation beyond his years of the passage of time.

"Indeed it has, Gloagie," replied the old man, running his hand over his forehead. Each year seemed to pass more quickly than those before it.

"What have you learned this year, Grandad?" The directness of the question caught him off guard. He thought for a while.

"Motivation. I think people are generally trying their best. We are all quick to criticise and assume that there is a hidden agenda, or some advantage being sought, or an attempt to do someone else harm. I am not sure about that.

"People are usually well-intentioned, it's just that we often don't see it from the other person's perspective - or understand the limitations under which they are operating, whether personally or in the world they inhabit. I think there are a lot of misconceptions around that could do with being corrected.

"We all carry baggage, Gloagie, and it gets in the way. We have a limited view of the world and it's usually distorted by our experiences. It's helpful to remember that there are two sides to most stories. The really clever people are the ones who are able to be flexible, who know that their ability to influence will increase the more they hold their personal prejudices in check and try to see the other point of view.

"Compassion, Gloagie, that's another thing. People think that compassion is a touchy-feely word and has no place in our profession. But there are a lot of compassionate folk around. Never forget that, when you hear all the comments about greed and self-interest.

"Most lawyers care. Most judges care - a great deal. And so do the politicians. Most of them, in their own ways, have the public interest in mind. But they seem to live in different worlds. Actually, Gloagie, they are not that different really, if only they could communicate more effectively with one another. It's not the differences that divide us, it's our judgments about each other.

"Humility, that's important," said the old man as he warmed to his theme. "We all make mistakes. And we can learn from them. But often that's not allowed in our world. So we protect ourselves and defend our positions. Aristotle didn't like humility - he was all for arrogance and pride with a good dose of self-confidence. But humility is not a sign of weakness. As someone once said, 'The first test of a truly great man is his humility.'

"Complacency, Gloagie, is the enemy for many of us. But things are changing. There is a big shake-up and maybe that's a good thing. It's a competitive world, of course, and that causes us to behave in certain ways. But people are beginning to realise that you can achieve a lot without being stuck in the past - or trampling over the other person. We all need our dignity and to be respected. And you have to live with uncertainty these days. The best advice I heard this year was this: 'When you don't know how to handle a difficult situation, trying doing the friendliest thing.'

"You must be able to laugh. A sense of humour will often take the edge off a difficult situation and help you to keep a sense of perspective. Don't sweat the small stuff, Gloagie."

"What's this got to do with the law, Grandad?" The youngster was getting agitated.

"Everything," came the old man's reply as he closed his eyes. "Happy Christmas lad."