

# **FISHING TRIPS, NOISE AND DUST, AND MILKING TIME.....**

**Three adult tales of childhood**

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Memories of childhood experiences may persist long after the original events took place; fuller understanding of what actually transpired may wait until time confers a renewed perspective. Sometimes, children themselves in their activities may help an adult to achieve a better understanding of their own past childhood experiences. One does not have to be an expert in child development, or to read textbooks on the subject, to be aware of the phenomenon. However, one would have to indeed be very dull not to experience an intellectual quickening when a event in the present evokes a memory of, or gives an insight into, an incident of personal childhood past.

The experience is like an echo in time; a spontaneous, instant, and effortless temporal bridging by the memory. Perhaps, depending on the circumstances, insights may then be shared, in turn, with a child in present time, thus completing, for one, and perpetuating, for the other, a small cycle of learning and experience. Adults often need to think twice to seize the opportunity to elaborate on a more significant moment, when sharing a learning experience with a child, and this they should be ready to do as part of their mature responsibilities. Such a loss it is, when such moments are glossed over by impatience or insensitivity; they may pass only to be later recognised for the significant opportunities they were to enrich a child's life at the time.

Such negligence can only foster closed minds between the generations, and hamper the inculcation of the learning habit through lack of adult example. The following anecdotes are concerned with this theme, though they do imply fruitful outcomes. Doubtless the same sorts of echoes subsist, in one form or another, within the memories of many other people; I trust that, in the main, they were of a rewarding nature for both young and old at the time, and in later recollection.

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Many years have passed since, as a child, I went fishing with my uncle on that windy Tasman coast with the long sloping beaches of tumbling, hissing, black sands. There were drifts of flotsam, mostly wood and seaweed; dunes of sand laced with marram grass, and miles of beach disappearing into the distance in a blue misty haze. The wind always blew, keeping the sand dancing and rushing in airy waves down the beach, the green sea had its own tang, and the beach smelt so fresh and sunbacked. The long swells rolled endlessly to crash and drag back down the sand; on a clear day the beach would seem even longer, and a snowy peak could be seen sunlit to the southwest, rising steeply from the sea.

More than 50 years later, I can hear that surf, smell the tang of salt water, sun and sand, as I wandered along the foreshore, while occasionally squinting against the glare and sunlight, back to where my uncle stood patiently outlined against the sea and sky, long surf-casting rod tall and slightly flexing beside him, the dipping line bringing him mysterious signals from the world of the ocean. I would then continue my explorations and fossicking along that vast littoral boundary, looking in the piles of seaweed for cuttlefish bones, unusually shaped driftwood, or the occasional exciting momento from the shipping lanes, like packing case timber with interesting lettering, or a glass float lost from a trawler's net. This place was a child's paradise, a magic, untamed Other-Land.

One particular day, I found a plastic bucket with curious rows of holes along its thick sides. To me at that age, with a child's logic, plastic was tough stuff, if thick, tougher than leather but less so than wood. So, the nature of the damage interested me, and so I took the bucket to show my uncle, standing guard with his rod in the cool wind, the wind-blown sand covering his feet, cupping a rollie in his hand against the wind, as he looked good-naturedly down at my proud find.

I asked him what he thought had happened, whether some sort of machine made those holes as they were so neat and regular, being in several rows, angled, and very cleanly cut into the tough plastic. To me it was a very mysterious find indeed. My uncle asked me if I knew about sharks, city kid that I was. He informed me that what I had discovered had been done by a shark, probably thinking that the bucket was something to eat, or even just while playing with it, if, indeed, sharks were capable of such behaviour.

Probably the bucket had a food smell about it which attracted the shark in the first place, as this was their keenest sense, and doubtless this item of ravaged jetsam had originated from the shipping-lane just off the coast; ships hull-down on the horizon we saw on every fishing-trip to this ocean beach.

Suddenly the bucket had a new, rather awesome significance. I was holding this object in my hand that had been so casually and dramatically chewed on by an actual live shark! Sharks I had heard about, or seen pictures of, but they were still mythical beings to me. (No TV in those days...) Here I was, holding this ravaged plastic in my small hands....it was as if I could feel the sharks teeth savaging my own childish fingers. I observed rather nervously that the shark must have been very strong to do such a thing, whereupon my uncle further impressed and awed me by saying that the shark had actually been rather small, judging by the toothmarks in the bucket. Why, there were sharks in the sea right out there from where we were fishing that were longer than his fishing rod, six metres or so of

homemade-custom-built baked and oiled bamboo with a fibreglass end, and at that length, could take the shark that chewed on my bucket as a bit of a snack, and that was a fact.

With this remark, my souvenir of the wilder elements of nature assumed almost mythical significance, linking me not only with the small shark, but now a much greater one whose toothmarks and actual teeth I could only conjecture about. Rows of them as well, sharp as razors, according to my uncle with all of his fisherman's wisdom. He gave me more information on sharks and their types, sizes, and feeding habits, as I stood beside him with the sand scurrying about my feet, hot on one side from the sun, cold on the other from the wind, and holding the rumpled red bucket in my hand like a talisman.

For perhaps the first time at a conscious level, I had come face to face with new forces, that, if not themselves immutable, were far stronger than those in my known childhood world. My own ordered corner of the cosmos suddenly seemed rather smaller than before; even the magic world of the surf beach was a threshold to unimaginable hazards. The bucket was my contact with an altogether more random and savage reality, and I glimpsed more of this in my imagination as my uncle carefully answered more questions, wherever they led, about the sea and other aspects of the natural world,

As the day wore on, and my uncle pulled in some fine schnapper, conversation began to falter, and I continued to fossick further, in case I should find other evidence of shark activity, my bucket still close at hand. When we eventually left the beach that afternoon, the bucket went with us in the car, my uncle saying little, apart from joking about not putting it under my pillow as it could give me bad dreams, because he knew, in his own wisdom, the significance to me of keeping this memento of our day.

When we arrived back at the farm, I showed my aunt my find, along with a big explanation, while she patiently listened to my tale, with comments of patient enthusiasm to sustain my childish interest and excitement. For the remainder of my holiday, the bucket remained in my possession, in a rather loose sense, in and around the farmhouse. After that, I lost track of it, though that was not so important, as the memory has never left me, that of my new-found maritime reality learnt on that dazzling wind-swept day.

Years later, as my uncle and aunt grew older, and I came to visit the farm again, after far-flung trips of my own, my uncle grew more shy and somewhat hostile, as he was a man who lived to the limits and self-imposed boundaries of a small personal territory, and seemed bewildered by my need to venture so far away. I also realised, with sadness, that he must have thought, then, that our early adventures together would not bear comparison with what I must have seen in far-flung parts of the world which he would never visit. Somehow I was not able to convey to him the importance, to me, of those earlier times, of strong and easily evoked memories of fishing and other excursions together, which was a matter of great personal regret, as the gap between us ever-widened with the further passing of time. My enthusiastic recounting of childhood impressions for his benefit as well as mine, may have seemed, somewhat forced, perhaps.

My aunt, who had a never-requited ambition to travel, thwarted by war and the economics and practicalities of her life as a sheep-farmer's wife, was able to understand our situation better. She was the one to hear most of my traveller's tales. With my uncle, the conversation was to be more and more of everyday things, like sheep prices, weather, dogs, regional events.....

But, the memory of fishing and other trips together has always remained strong for me, as was my introduction to the old-fashioned man's world of farming the land, and its adventures, toils and vagaries. He was also, at times, in loco parentis, as was my aunt, to many other nephews, nieces, and grandchildren as the years went by. Happily, most of them were closer, more local territorial types also; their bonds to my aunt and uncle remaining stronger, and more familiar and affectionate.

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Some years later, I was working in the demolition business in the city. Most of our work at that time was in the suburbs, owing to urban renewal being encouraged. Nowadays, there are stricter controls on what goes and what stays in such projects, and I shudder now to think of what we alone pulled or knocked down, sold bits of, carried away, or even burnt, in the way of fine neo-colonial edifices. In mitigation, I suppose, we did not make those decisions of progress and urban renewal, just earned our living, and at a time when cutting ties with the past was more important than to-day. Modernisation, the driving urban ideological force of the day, was itself a matter of national and civic pride after the war.

The work itself was hard, dirty and dangerous, but never boring, as keeping one's mind on the job meant keeping the job efficient and safe, and minimising the consequences for the surrounding area. A good demolition team of any size at work is one of the great sights and demonstrations of manual work in my opinion, there being so many skills required, plus ad hoc decisions, time limits, and hazards to overcome. In our case, the team was three and a driver,

and with salvage as well, we could remove the average house in one or two days. For bigger jobs, we would combine with another unit of workers like ourselves, also employed by the same company, but all worked for the common advantage, so even the biggest job was an adventure as well as an exercise in co-operation.

One particular house site I do remember, having on it a simply built but elegant turn-of-the century home, complete with high decorated ceilings, long filigreed verandah, and heavy double chimneys. Inside were the usual heavy plumbing, paneling, and cast-iron fire settings. Probably it would good for another 100 years, and to be now sacrificed for a row of red-double-brick neo-Bauhaus units. Oh well.....

Anyway, we began our task of demolition and removal in the usual manner, with salvage of non-structural and easily accessible materials receiving our first efforts, before swarming over the roof and noisily removing the corrugated iron. After that would come the walls, then floors and foundations, and finally whatever site work that was required, like removal of fences or sheds, even final bulldozing of the now-empty site.

Demolition is, of necessity, dusty, noisy work, and usually accompanied by smoke from fires in those days before stricter pollution controls. However, we were usually off the site in a couple of days on small jobs, so the novelty of our activities in the local area seemed to balance out any unpleasantness, in the short term, at least. Neighbours or passers-by, especially the children, would watch with interest; sometimes we would be offered a cup of tea, mostly by the older age group who would be glad of a diversion, and having a store of memories to share. Sadly, the priorities of our work would, also of necessity, cut such pleasant social contacts short.

On this particular job, the old house was close to the back boundary, and thus close to the neighbors' much newer house, which had been erected on a subdivision site. This posed a few technical and safety problems, but nothing we could not handle. Noise, dust and the occasional verbalizing could not be so easily limited, but we would do our best, of course. Once the house had been cleared on the inside, the sturdy old sash windows were levered out, doors removed, etc., and then we began on the roof. While I was adding to the hammering banging and screeching of metal that is part of iron roof removal, I glanced towards the neighbouring house, which had a wide picture window featuring on the wall facing our work site.

I noticed a small boy standing solemnly at the window, watching our gang at work removing a neighbourhood landmark. I waved as we all usually did for children, and received an uncharacteristically restrained acknowledgment. Obviously, it seemed to me, the child was interested, though rather awed, and not really sure of what was going on. Probably under strict instructions to remain indoors as well, I thought in passing; perhaps home sick from school, sworn to remain within call by a careful parent wishing to be aware of his whereabouts at all times...

Soon the iron was off the roof, and we began to drop in the roof timbers and ceilings, (farewell to more of those antique sheets of pressed zinc), moving precariously around the gaps created. After one particularly loud crash and cloud of dust, I looked over to where the child was watching, thinking that it would all be fun to watch. I saw him still at the window, but with such a stricken look on his face, and this time there was only a very sketchy answer to my wave. I continued on with my work.

The little boy never stood at the window again for the remainder of the time we were at the site, as far as I or other members of the gang knew, and we did discuss this among ourselves briefly, because the boy's reaction was so different to that of other children. I suppose that he was shocked that the old house, which had patently been a significant and constant landmark throughout his short life, could so easily and arbitrarily be swept away. Probably this was the first real shock he faced about the potential impermanence of the physical world, and of forces and decisions outside his particular corner of it.

Presumably he recovered from the shock of such sudden and drastic change to his small, customary world, possibly with the help of an understanding adult, and learned by it. Certainly, my friendly wave was, at the time, not enough to counter the effects of what he saw; perhaps a parent was the recipient of his concerns about such an abrupt and final change. I would like to have talked with him about what he thought, but the opportunity would never now arise.

I hope he did not feel too badly towards us at the time; after all, the modern house he lived in was itself a sign of the changes that were sweeping away such graceful landmarks as the late lamented old neo-colonial home, and we were all caught up together in those changes. When our gang finally left that site after two days, all that remained was an empty section, mostly bare earth with some bruised grass and shrubs surrounded by fences, and a new builder's sign nailed to the front gate ready for the following morning.

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There was a mixed farm I used to work on, while still an itinerant farmhand, during the long dry summers and autumns in the south, right on the 45<sup>th</sup> Parallel. Tucked in beside the rain-shadowed foothills of the Alps on a fertile and irrigated alluvial flat, the land supported crops, dairy cows and some sheep. The work was hard and steady at this time, as we had the harvest and preparation for the onset of winter, as well as the routine farm tasks like daily milking. Any season, good or bad, was a race against the end of Autumn, before the onset of annual frost and snow. But, they were happy times, a contemporary rural idyll, if not exactly Elysian, and the farm was modern enough, in terms of technology, to escape the grinding drudgery of earlier pioneering times. As well, a steady stream of visitors provided a break in routine, and farm help of variable degrees of expertise.

One such visitor was a little girl from the city, very bright and rather forthright of nature, who observed with great interest the daily goings-on, and was quite determined not to be intimidated by cows, sheep, or other living things on the farm, whether possessed of two legs or four. She was especially interested in milking time, watching carefully what went on, though never deigning to ask questions, of which other children would pose plenty for us shed hands to answer. Her main self-appointed task was to open gates, and usher briskly into milking-stalls our quiet cows, who knew just exactly what they were doing anyway as defined by their herd pecking/butting order, and who placidly tolerated her determined ministrations.

Our machine milking system was an old Alpha-Laval, which took time to build up suction with each cup change. This gave me the idea of for a small practical joke which would amuse a child, and possibly lead to more questions from her of what milking was all about, and how our machine worked and so forth. Certainly better than to let the child think that bluffing her way through milking would go unrecognized, as she would learn little that way in life, as child or adult. So, accordingly, the next time she was following a cow to a stall, I asked her to wait and carefully hold the tail while I washed the teats, squeezed some milk from each to check all was well, and put on the cups.

As I put on the last cup, I told her to move the tail up and down like a pump-handle in time to the beat of the old machine, because this would speed up the flow of milk. All she had to do was to watch the sight-glass to see when the milk started to flow, then cease cranking. Sure enough, after a few careful pumps by the honorary milk-maid, the milk appeared in the glass right on cue, a cause of some wonderment indeed.

I suggested that she could stop now and get ready for the next client, as things would be a bit faster from now on with this very useful addition to our routine, which had just needed that extra pair of hands to perform. I glanced over to where my co-worker was watching all this with great interest, and gave him a wink, which seemed to cause him some difficulty with breathing, and we both bent to the task in hand once more.

For the remainder of the milking, our proud little helper assisted in promoting the milk flow of about 30 of our tolerant, if bemused, "ladies"; only very occasionally was there any real and visible signs of bovine nervousness that needed shoveling up. After doing so well, she was then excused any part in the clean-up and wash-down because we had saved so much time due to her prime efforts, so to speak. So, the little milkmaid went proudly back to the farmhouse for her dinner, after giving the stragglers an extra energetic shooing down the race toward their pasture.

At the shed, my colleague and I had a bit of a chuckle, and wondered how long it would be till the cat was out of the bag. Then we exchanged stories of our own about similar experiences of such droll agricultural practical jokes being played on us, when we were much younger and still learning about country ways. Like being sent for wrinkle-stretchers for difficult sheep at shearing time, or making sure the bull came in for his turn at milking time, or digging a few spare post-holes in winter when the ground was soft so they could be moved and used later, or being sent on urgent errands for such vital things as round tuits and watsidigits.

Not to mention doing things on a promise for the day after tomorrow. A sort of gentle agrarian introduction to the difference between the seemingly logical and definitely empirical, and the importance of knowing the difference through the development of a healthy skepticism, a valuable lesson when muddling through would never be good enough in this world of work, seasons, animals, and husbandry. We hoped our erstwhile cow-primer would take it all in good heart.....

As it happened, by the time we cleaned up, saw the cows safely deployed for the night, and picked up a few extra hay-bales, it was past dark when we got back to the farmhouse for a shower and dinner, and past the children's bedtime. However, by this time the story was out regarding the enhancement of milk flow by tail manipulation, or what ever else it should be called, and all the adults and the other youngsters had a good laugh about it. Apparently I was going to cop it good and proper the next day when the milkmaid caught up with me. As she would not be at the morning milking, I would have all day to prepare my story before we met again at the afternoon session.

Sure enough, a small and rather indignant young lady with bright pink cheeks confronted me as I went to the shed that afternoon to prepare for milking, asking me why I had done such a thing to her, as everyone was laughing etc.... So I put a brave face on things, and suggested that they laughed at her because she was fussing, as much as for the joke

played on her. This was met with thoughtful, if grudging silence, until I suggested that now she knew how the joke worked, she could play it on someone else in her turn, even another adult if she could find the right one.....

This met with a warmer response, so the crisis was over, and, as the cows were plodding up the race towards the shed, we got on with the task at hand. There was no more talk of tail-cranking, and the Number 1 Dairy Helper was given new and more useful shed duties, like attending to feed-boxes, and carrying warm water in her own small bucket, albeit with a few careful questions on the potential usefulness of her new tasks. After that, as I worked on that afternoon, I do remember being aware of the odd thoughtful look from time to time. But there was no ill-feeling between us, from that time on.

I wonder whether anyone else was caught out by her with the same joke, or variations of it, at a later date. Certainly, the joke was not to be readily forgotten, and perhaps even to be visited on her own children in times to come, to gently aid them in cultivating a healthy skepticism in their turn. I have often thought, as my own life has progressed, that the best learning often comes when we least expect it, child or adult, given sufficient wit to recognise this at the time, and to take advantage of the moment.