

A memoir

My dear grandchildren, as these reflections are really meant for you, I'd better begin by explaining what's in them and why I thought it might be a good idea to write them down. And the first thing that occurs to me is something negative. I don't mean to make my life look like a great adventure. It has been an ordinary adventure, in the way being alive and kicking is an adventure for everyone. That's because, for human beings, existence is like a stage, with all beneath a wonderful, restless mystery which leaks through the boards here and there, enough to remind us to be grateful for it.

My second reason for writing is this: I'm pretty sure it's better to have some idea of how the world came to be the way it is - the human world, that is, the one we use most of our consciousness in. That means, it's not a bad idea to know how it changes. And it seems to me in some ways, it's changed a lot since I was a little squirt, and you might be interested in how it was then, so you know that a lot of the stuff you see around you will change too. The third reason is my father. At around the age of 80, he decided to write a memoir like this, and when I read it, and understood why he was doing it, I saw that it's a good thing to do. Every society, from the beginning of time until ours, apparently, has used the experience of elders to learn from, and, being an elder myself, I suspect this neglect of ours isn't a specially good thing - but you will judge for yourself.

There's another reason, although I feel a bit diffident explaining it. I've been fortunate in many ways. Not the least of them is to have had the chance to learn some big lessons as I probed the path of life. When I think of you, my wonderful grandchildren, I don't feel as if I have anything to teach you - and yet, experience is a bit like gold - hard to get, worth hanging onto, and a good thing to bequeath. So I guess if you have patience to read, you will take what you need - diversion, instruction, or something else.

The very first time I opened my eyes and looked on the light of the world was on the morning of January 19th, 1944 in a room of the Women's Hospital in Brisbane. At the time, things were a long way from normal in that city. The place was full of American soldiers, as well as our own fighting forces. My father was an officer in an intelligence unit at the Indooroopilly army barracks, where, among other things, they interrogated Japanese prisoners. It would be another year and a half before the war would end at Nagasaki, and some time after that until father went back into the life he had lived before 1940.

I have often wondered about the curious fact that the human world could have been in such a distracted state, full of calamity, death and destruction, at the beginning of my life, and yet well before its end, this madness has been - not exactly forgotten, but half-erased, rather as if it had been fifty life-times ago, not one. Maybe you'll get a sense of what I mean if I tell you that on the same day I looked at my mother for the first time, Josef Stalin the Russian dictator announced the end of the siege of Leningrad, a two-year episode of destructive fury, immeasurable suffering and heroism as infamous as anything in the world's long story.

For me, the most poignant reminder is this: the very same day I was eating my first birthday cake, January 19, 1945, Primo Levy, so he tells us, spent his first day in Auschwitz unguarded. Not exactly free, but not imprisoned either; the camp's liberation came a week later. During the night of the 18th, the 60,000 or so prisoners able to move were marched out of the camp into the bitter snow. So as it turned out, my first year was the last for Auschwitz. We don't know if we will ever see such things again; and yet this circumstance - that the tranquility and privilege of my life took root in great travail remains to be wondered at. It is a very curious thing - the way time erases the living past like a bulldozer, wiping the landscape of memory clean and flat. I guess we gain something and lose something by it.

Another thing happened the day I was born. Since I learned about it, I've had a strange feeling that somehow (as long as you are impressed by coincidences) it is like some kind of signpost. On January 19th the man who had been Pope throughout the war, Pius XII, issued an "allocution", a kind of open letter to the nobility and patriciate of Rome. After lamenting to the nobles (what was left of them) about the sad state of the world, this is what he had to say:

"Is not human society, or at least, should it not be, like a finely tuned machine, in which all the parts work together toward the harmonious functioning of the whole? Each part has its own role, and each must apply himself toward the best possible progress of the social organism; each must seek to perfect it, according to his strengths and virtues, if he truly loves his neighbour and reasonably strives for the common good and welfare."

This struck me as a curious thing to say. It almost sounds as if he's exhorting the return of peaceful order after the long conflict. And that's fine. But remember, this is the Pope who abstained from virtually all responsibility as a moral advocate during those six long years, ignoring the plight of millions of persecuted people, and barely protesting the Nazi state that swamped his continent. With that in mind, his meaning looks a bit different. You can then see the Pope's picture of the human world is totalitarian - a human ant-hill. Freedom, not power, is danger, he says; let us trust in the aristocrats and extol obedience. This very old idea had been

given a thorough trial during those years of catastrophe, and by then all sensible people knew that it was false. It is one of those ideas that belongs to privilege. And here he is upholding it as if to say the world we should strive for is the one his organization ruled 500 years ago. This authoritarian way of seeing things did not quite die in 1945. Nor will it ever be extinct.

The fact is, as long as we have inside us the same human nature, we will be torn between the desire to lead ourselves and the yearning to submit to a leader. When the Pope published his letter the day I was born there were just a handful of democracies in the world; now there are more than 100 (though not all equally virtuous). I have spent my life in extraordinary times, a time of marvels. This is one of them - you might well say the most precious of all - the way so many of the world's people have been able to take the government of their affairs into their own hands, learning the tricky craft of responsibility and steering the ship of state through stormy waters. In my view it is one of the most hopeful things that has ever happened.

And yet ... here at the brink of the post-war era, the church's leader sets his face against liberty. What is the love of authority really? I've often asked myself and never yet found a fully satisfactory answer. Whatever it is, its presence is what leavens every genuine debate in democracies like ours; it is the deep source of all the tension that requires these societies to renew themselves continually - or else wither; and I think I can see now that its future struggle with the idea and practice of liberty will be the defining theme of my grandkids' time, just as the (incomplete) triumph of democracy was of mine. But now I'd better tell you about the place I was taken after a week in that hospital.

I was my parents' first child, followed by my sister Rhyl a year and a half later, and my brother Rod five years after that. We lived in a house in Railway Terrace, Indooroopilly, just a short walk from the army depot where father worked. I can only remember bits and pieces of it - the tall front steps; the space underneath, where mother would hang the clothes to dry when it rained, and where you could encounter big spiders clinging to the wooden posts. I seem to remember the man who called with fruit, and the walks we took across the bridge over the railway line to the shops.

I remember the smell of orange blossom from the tree in the garden of that house; the sensation of the swing Dad hung from the branches; the time when the boy down the road coaxed me to eat chillies plucked from the bush next to the front fence. I remember old Mr Swain, our neighbour, and the taste of the nuts from his big macadamia tree. This delicious flavour remains like a benchmark even



now - it's just as if every macadamia I ever tasted since is taken to some remote deposit of the memory and measured against Swain's. Of course the belief that memories are constant is false. They evolve just like all living things. And they die.

Mum had an old school friend who lived across the river in Chelmer, and she must have taken us over there to visit, because I have a sense of the awful height of that walkway on the Indooroopilly bridge, the plunging fall to the water below, and a pattern of recurring dreams - enduring that downward flight, ending in the brown water or the mud. The house isn't there any more. Neither is the army. And I have to confess, if I go to the place now, I can't recall any vivid or palpable memories at all.

In about 1948 we moved to a nice new house on what was then called Coronation Drive in the mostly bush suburb of St Lucia, a few miles from Indooroopilly. This street, which must have been named after the crowning of a prior sovereign, gave up its name in the year of the Queen's coronation, 1953. It's now called Hawken Drive, and the Queen got a more important street a few miles down river closer to the city. Not far up the road the new University of Queensland was being built. I remember going there with Dad when it was pretty much still a grassy paddock with big sandstone blocks lying around. They'd begun building the University just before the war, but then stopped. What had been finished was used during the war

as headquarters for the Pacific command. They must have taken it up again just about the time we went there.

I started school at the big red-brick place strangely called *Ironside* - I never learned why - catching a bus each morning and afternoon. There was plenty of room in St Lucia then; empty allotments full of bush, and roads with little traffic. We rode scooters everywhere. I had a nice red one with big wheels. It seemed as if crashing off your scooter and scraping skin off your knees was as normal as eating your lunch.

One morning outside the school, this story might well have ended before it got interesting. But it didn't. I ran out of the bus, round the back and into the road, intent on delivering my mother's shopping list to the butcher. Next thing I remember tumbling very fast on the road, ending in the gutter. I jumped up, noticing my school bag had been broken, and went into the butcher without trying to figure out what had happened. Apparently when something is totally inexplicable, and you're a child, you don't need to know. In a moment or two a trembling pale man followed me in. There was a fuss, and he drove me home. I guess there was another fuss. I learned something about how to cross the road. I tell this story this way because that's all I can remember. Obviously it was a big deal for my parents, the driver and the school, but if there was notoriety for the boy who got run over and survived unhurt, I wasn't aware of it. It does show though, that small things can have big consequences - or not. That puzzle must be something to do with why we have the idea of fate - a concept which bears no scrutiny at all, yet seems to be unavoidable.

Dad had acquired a nice Leica camera while he was in Palestine in 1941, and raised enough money selling it to buy the land for his house. It was a low masonry place, comfortable and roomy I suppose, with polished hardwood floors and lots of space for kids to amuse themselves. We had friends, and the district was clearly going places, with nice houses being built and the promise of a University village. In June 1950, Rod came along. We might have stayed for ever had not something else happened.

Like many veterans, father was not the same man at the end of the war as the young officer who had entered it with goodness knows what expectations in 1940. We know from his own account that on demobilization he tried to make a new career in business, but nevertheless went back to his desk at the AMP Society at the end of 1945. But the thought of staying there for the rest of his days must have seemed intolerable, because five or six years later he sold the St Lucia house and moved his family to a little farm on Buderim Mountain, and there we lived for about a year, maybe less. There was a small plantation of bananas and a field for

growing beans and tomatoes. The front gate on the road was framed by mango trees. There was a shed that smelt of fertilizer. Rod probably learned to walk there. Rhyl and I would walk a mile or so to Buderim school over the thick grass studded with cow pats.

Buderim is still a pretty handsome place, an elevated plateau of deep volcanic soil a few miles from the coast. Once, it held a magnificent tall rainforest, but by the time we got there, that had all gone. Farms had replaced the forest. Over the years, they had grown coffee, fruit & vegetables, peanuts, cows - but in the 1950s it was mostly ginger. It was a piece of one of these my father had bought - five acres on which he hoped to support his family and fashion a new life. Today, the house we lived in is still there. It was moved up to the road, and the farm covered in new houses. I learned this from someone who'd been our neighbour, and still lives there. Otherwise you'd never know - the place is simply unrecognizable.

There was a factory that turned the ginger crop into the stuff you eat. That was right across from the school. And there was still a sawmill, even though they'd pretty much run out of trees to saw. The mill has gone, and the ginger factory, but the school is still there, in the same place, much bigger now, still framed by a plantation of tall handsome hoop pines. Then it was just one small wooden building with maybe two class rooms, and in one of those little rooms, shaded by great Moreton Bay fig trees, I learned to recite the names of the books of the Bible in the correct order - and maybe some other things too. I'm sad to say that this lesson, from want of rehearsal, has now faded, and I could not recite those names as I could then, not if the devil himself demanded it. Try as I might, I can't think of anything else I learned there.

What did my father feel so strongly about that he quit a safe career and committed his family to an open-ended adventure? Whatever it was, it was stronger than the approbation he must certainly have received from his in-laws and probably other well-meaning advisors. It overcame his natural caution and the prudent habits of people who grew up in the great depression. It must have been very important to him, and the disappointment due to failure must have been equally powerful. He never spoke of that time again - not to us and not to the readers of his memoir.

If I had to guess an answer to this question, I would guess Buderim was an existential adventure - not in any frivolous or hedonist sense - but an act of independence, a claim of a solitary spirit for recognition, an affirmation of something ... rural innocence perhaps, creative space, even an alternative political future? We shall never know. What is clear to me is that it was an act of courage and imagination, and that its failure must have removed his chance to make his motives coherent and meaningful by working through their sources and

consequences - so they were suppressed instead. I think he probably suffered from having to bear this dead tissue for the rest of his days, and missing the liberation his adventure was meant to bring.

We quit Buderim sometime in 1951 I believe, because I remember the celebrations that took place in the jubilee year of the Australian federation, and I remember them in the parade ground at Corinda school. Each morning before class, the whole school would assemble in a space below an elevated veranda where the head-teacher stood. This man - Fowler was his name, a circumstance that earned him the nick-name "chook" - made certain announcements and urged on all of us principles of good conduct and patriotism - an imperial kind of loyalty, perhaps understandable in those post-war years, framed by daily singing of the National anthem: *God Save the King* (George VI was still alive then) and recitation of prayers. He also delivered punishments for crimes heinous enough to warrant public flogging. Lesser misdemeanours would be met with a private caning in his office or by the class teacher if he happened to wield the stick himself.

Father exchanged the little farm for a house in Rathlyn Avenue, Corinda, and there we lived, all of us, until after we three kids had all grown up and left. It's a bit hard to revive a credible picture of the way the place was then. Now, wherever you go in that district, you are hemmed by houses on all sides; the only open spaces are reserved ones - more or less tidy parks. But when I knew it as a child, there were more vacant blocks than full; whole acres of green paddocks flourished amongst the houses and allotments, and just across the corner there was a wonderful wilderness with trees, bushes and hiding places enough to keep us occupied for ever. Soxie the draught-horse lived there and if you took that way back from school, you'd encounter old Soxie with her horsey smell and green lips, looking for a bit of bread or something. At the western end of the street, almost at the corner, a vast wild place opened up that went all the way down to the River.

A kid's life was a lot less organized than it is now. A few of my school mates played cricket in a team on Saturday, and practiced after school, but most of us spent our free time - it seemed to be endless - tearing around on our scooters or bikes, making forts and weapons for war-games in the bush, kicking the football, jumping hurdles and climbing trees and countless other carefree uses of energy. I guess our life was more like Tom Sawyer's than like the structured, ambitious, crowded and safety-conscious themes of childhood we're used to now.

You could find plenty of whippy sticks to make bows. And there was a certain weed called stinking roger that grew tall stems (that smell is another sensation I can summon just by thinking of it), and because they were light and straight, they made good arrows. Goodness knows how many of these we put together for

shooting at targets, or magpies and sparrows, or each other. You could make a shanghai out of a forked stick and a bit of old bicycle tube, and a billy-cart out of old stuff, or a clumsy canoe to take down to the creek.

For some reason, one memory of those days is more lively than most others. A couple of miles away on the river bank there was a reserve called Sherwood arboretum. It included a swampy place with a dire reputation. Fall in there, it was said, and you'll be sucked down and never seen again. I think we had all incorporated this truth, and so playing around the swamp had a vicarious sort of thrill. Across the bog ran a big pipe, and one day, running along this, I turned to the boy behind me and slipped. The sensation that came next is what makes that afternoon tenacious in my mind even today. In the second I flew through the air, staring at the slime I thought, 'I'm going to disappear' and in an instant decided not to submerge into that unspeakable muck. According to the boy I'd turned towards it was just as if I bounced off the surface, barely touching it. Quicker than thought, I was hanging onto a concrete block and climbing back on top. I really can't say what happened except that I probably had a fleeting experience of that overpowering survival instinct you hear about. Just like they say, you don't know it's there until you need it.

This is where I passed the years between wanton youth and earnest adolescence; from bows and arrows and Batman comics to the lecture hall and intimations of manhood. It was an innocent time. People didn't lock their houses as they do now; they didn't worry about their kids getting into trouble - at least not with predators. Nobody felt very much that sense of being a citizen of the whole world which weighs on us now, sometimes a little too much, and sometimes not enough. Really, we still don't know how to belong to a community bigger than our Nation, and yet our disability is taunted by the steady stream of news about the condition of distant people and problems that involve us all.

The people of Queensland saw their first television broadcast in 1959, the year of the State's centenary. At first TV was a parochial medium, reinforcing that old feeling that we were the centre of things, or if not exactly the centre, then the preferred sector of them. Folks in the fifties had a view of the world quite different to ours - a view founded on some basic facts that were carefully instilled in us during those years at school. We thought of ourselves as a British people, stranded by historical accident on the opposite side of the world to our cultural, spiritual and historical origins.

As a kid, I guess I saw the extraordinary enthusiasm for Britain most clearly in 1954 when the Queen came. The whole country seemed to think of nothing else. The streets of Brisbane and every other town and city she visited were hung with

decorations. Extravagant ceremonies were held in welcome. Lavish gifts bestowed, and praises sung. It appeared every schoolchild in town came out to line the route from the airport to city hall. I was a scout cub at the time, and stood in the front row. I felt sure the Queen had actually looked at me as she passed - a stunning revelation, and when she had gone, I looked down and saw that, in the press of the crowd, my shirt had been pulled open all down the front, so she might after all have stared a moment at a cub dishevelled in her honour.

Recent experience with the hostile Japanese had reinforced what had always been tacitly understood - that it was dangerous to be so isolated in the Asian hemisphere - and so the country's leaders began a big immigrant program in the 50s & 60s to "fill the place up". This would hasten our "development" and reduce the temptation of all that space to envious northern neighbours. None of the neighbours, of course were invited to join this stream of hopeful arrivals - most were British; and nearly all the rest were continental Europeans.

When lots of people from southern Europe began arriving in the post war decades, there was a fuss that would seem a bit surprising now. Many people were not too comfortable about the Greeks, Italians and Yugoslavs who began appearing everywhere among us. We sort of knew how to assimilate English, Irish, Scots & Welsh, and even those honorary Anglo-Saxons the Dutch, but post-war immigrants had some strange habits - funny food, and their own religion. It took a generation for this anxiety to go away - just in time for it to be re-awakened by the Vietnamese in the 1970s & 80s.

A lot of suburban streets weren't covered with asphalt; ours was made of gravel like most of the others, and down that street would come the baker's cart, pulled by an old draught horse every couple of days. I can still remember the smell of fresh bread spreading around the cart as it came, and the clatter of stones beneath the horse's feet. The milkman brought fresh milk in the evening and dealt out the amount you wanted from one of the big cans in the back of his truck. You'd carry it inside in a billy and stick it into the ice-box. People had fridges, but they were fairly new and expensive, so most houses kept their old ice-box - a sort of cabinet made of wood, lined with zinc sheet and kept cool with a block or two of ice from the local ice-works. Ours was delivered from the works in Sherwood a few miles away. The guy would run in with the heavy blocks grasped in tongs, and put them into the shelf in the bottom of the box.

They hadn't invented super-markets then. I can still remember when the first one came to Oxley, the next suburb, and what a fuss there was - this American idea that looked as if it might change the way we did our shopping. Well, after a while it certainly did. Before that, you'd get the groceries from the local grocer; ours was

Schneider's at Oxley, just near the railway station. They would deliver the stuff each week, and when the bloke came, you'd give him a list for the next week. If you wanted stuff meantime, you'd go down to the shop where old Mr Schneider and his assistants spent their days behind a big wooden counter wearing aprons. Riding down the hill to the grocer was a task I often fulfilled. The shop had a very characteristic smell, although it's a bit hard to say what it was. Something to do with the wooden bins full of everything from flour and sugar to dried peas and sago. You would ask for what you wanted, one thing at a time, and the shop man would scoop it from its bin into a paper bag, then weigh it and close the bag with a special flourish, perfected after years of practice.

Of course, the super-market could send out heaps more food with far fewer people - after all, the customer was doing the work - so it wasn't too long and Schneider's was feeling the pinch. By and by only old folks went there, and one day I guess, they closed the door for the last time. The only way to get a feel for this style of commerce that I know of now is to get your food in a French village or town. For some reason of their own, the French didn't think super-markets were such a great idea and never adopted them with abandon the way most other people did. They figured that although efficiency is good, you don't want to give up too much to get it. And in this, I think they might have been right.

The Schneider family lived in a house behind Scott Gregory, the boy across the road. If you hit a ball from Gregory's tennis court over the high fence into Schneider's it was a big deal, partly because you had a tricky time getting over the fence, partly because of the dog, but mostly because of the owner's reputation for being cranky and unpredictable if you were found in his vegetable garden below the fence. A block away lived Peter Sherwood, and a bit further away, Brian Jeffreys. These were my constant companions until I was about 14. Up our street a bit lived another boy whose name I can't remember, who wasn't a friend exactly, but who harboured a treasure - a vast collection of comics that you could swap for various things from time to time. I think he must have been a Catholic, but perhaps not. At any rate that would have explained why propinquity didn't go with intimacy in his case. Catholics were different.

The first boy I ever met at Corinda turned up while the truck was still unloading our stuff. He was John Darcy, amiable, and interested in my model plane, but before long I seem to have acquired the understanding that he was not suitable to be a good mate. I'm not sure now how this idea was propagated, but it was effective and universal. John didn't go to Corinda school with us, but to the Catholic school somewhere else (I've forgotten where it was now). A bus came to collect all the kids who went daily to that mysterious place. We heard they were taught by nuns and priests in black robes, and spent a good bit of their time at

school imbibing the distinctive commitments of their religion. There was enough anti-catholic animus left in Australian society to motivate us to yell taunts at them as the bus passed, and foment our own prejudice backed by rumour and fabrication.

It's a bit hard to say what we learned during the eight years we spent in the classrooms at primary school. We became literate of course, and could imagine the geography of the planet a bit better by the end. We knew a little of the history of the English-speaking people, specially their deeds in the Australian wilderness of the nineteenth century. The founding of our country was told as a heroic tale of bravery and suffering, sacrifice and exertion, donated for the sake of future people (us) by a race more disinterested and hardy than we, and most worthy of emulation. It was an imperial story of conquest - not of inferior people - but of a hostile continent, unforgiving, capricious, but also, in its tamed state, fecund and rewarding beyond measure. Truly another America, only awaiting another heroic age for its fulfilment. A great deal of public discourse as well as education invited us to be stirred by this ideal, and hence to commit.

And yet things were not quite as they seemed. In spite of all the jingoism you couldn't hide that peculiarly Australian sense of awkward inferiority - the convict stain. The belief that you couldn't possibly found a decent (certainly not a superior) society on such defective stock was absolutely normal during the nineteenth century. In Britain, the belief was orthodox and unchallenged; in Australia, it was acknowledged and resisted - but at heart we knew the Poms had a point. Culturally, we felt as dependent on them for affirmation as a baby on its mother. Indeed, references to Britain as the "mother country" and "home" were perfectly routine and normal. That helps explain the odd intensity of cricket contests between the two nations when I was young, and the crazy elation evinced by any victory of ours.

It was quite normal for academic people to make pronouncements about the quality of Australian culture to the effect that nothing of the first rank had yet been produced here; and one should not hold one's breath waiting for a flowering of arts and literature either - the necessary ingredients for excellence were just not there. Talented people all went off to London or Europe to try their luck, and we enjoyed their success vicariously, as co-owners of that renown, rather as if our paternity was suspect - adoptive rather than genetic. One professor, an expert in language, told us Australian speech showed our slack character in its sounds and habits. We needed to pull up our socks. We read some Australian poems and short stories at school, but when it came to serious stuff capable of a moral message - drama and the novel - it was always British.

I don't know if it was because paper was expensive, or for some other reason with roots in a prior age, but until about the sixth grade, we didn't write on exercise books, but on a piece of slate. I think the slate was brought from India, but it was dug from the ground somewhere, dressed into a neat rectangular shape about the size of a sheet of paper, and usually framed with wood like a picture. You could write on it with a stick of something - maybe another bit of slate, called a slate-pencil; and when you were done, you washed your work away with a wet rag or sponge. So all those were standard items of the classroom. The desk had a slot in the back where you stowed the slate when it wasn't in use. When we eventually left slates behind, we used a pen with a nib, and the desk held an ink-well in a hole provided for it. This was filled with dark blue ink from a big jar the teacher kept in a cupboard (for some reason always called a "press") at the front of the room.

They used to think it was a good idea to imitate an ideal hand-writing as closely as possible. Back then all written communication except official stuff was done by hand, and there was a strong belief that a person's character could be discerned in the way they wrote - not just the words and phrases, but in the letters too. So we used to spend hours and hours studiously copying lines of text into a "copy-book". If you had this assignment to do at home in the evening, the teacher would carefully assess your work next day. Of course this educational practice had roots a century or more back when "penmanship" was considered an important accomplishment not only for private correspondence, but in business and the professions too. As far as I remember this exercise continued until I left the primary school.

We didn't use many textbooks. I remember one that combined social and political history with what is sometimes called "civics", which teaches kids what it takes to be a good citizen in a liberal democracy. The history was heavy with stories about British Kings and Queens and the establishment of the Empire; and with the adventures of valorous and stubborn Englishmen & Scotsmen in the Australian wilderness. I remember learning about the sequence of major social reforms as they were enacted in the British parliament, from 1832, without understanding anything at all about what was being reformed. I'm not sure the teachers were much wiser than we.

It's a bit surprising to recall how much religion we encountered at school. Each week, an ordained man (no women were ordained in any church then) would take a class and we learned stories from the Bible - both old and new - and how to recite passages from that book word for word. I only remember four or five teachers from those days, but each of them was a religious enthusiast. One guy propagated a stern form of the faith, reinforced by pretty liberal use of his muscular cane. I don't think he was a sadistic type, just convinced by the old story

that kids were created evil and had to be rescued by discipline. Another teacher was an elderly woman of ample frame who must have worn copious garments because I remember her passing around the verandahs and corridors of the school like a ship under sail, her white hair flowing. Her religion was more earnest and compassionate than her colleague's but like him, she was deeply concerned by sin, and very keen to eradicate it in her pupils.

I remember the time she told us (apropos of what?) about her former student who returned from serving in the great war of 1914-18, and seeking her out, related how, in a deadly charge, he had seen his companions falling on either side, and terrified, turning his thoughts to his creator, suddenly the teacher's voice came to him quoting from the Psalm:

*“Thou shalt not be afraid for the terror by night;
nor for the arrow that flieth by day;
nor for the pestilence that walketh in darkness’
nor for the destruction that wasteth at noonday.
A thousand shall fall by thy side,
and ten thousand at thy right hand;
but it shall not come nigh thee.
.... For he shall give his angels charge over thee,
to keep thee in all thy ways.”*

Thereupon, this young man, so she said, was greatly comforted and survived with his faith much confirmed.

The one book - or series, to be exact - that all students in Queensland schools remember best is the grade readers, one for each year. These graded anthologies had been compiled many years earlier by well-meaning people in the State education bureaucracy - in fact my parents had read from exactly the same texts - and they nicely reflected a certain view of what a child should learn about the social world in order to be an upright citizen. Both prose and poetry were represented in each volume. It's a safe bet that everyone who went to school in this system can answer the question, "what's your favourite thing from the reading book?" Such was the impression of these pieces that I dare say many of them created influences that lasted for life. For instance, Henry Lawson's story about the drover's wife was there. A big snake enters the humble house of the lady while she is alone in it with her children and the family dog. The evil creature goes into a crack, and it takes a long vigil and great courage before it is destroyed. Absorbing the atmosphere and implied moral of this story has surely had more to do with Australians' attitudes to snakes than any amount of direct experience of them.

Kipling is there, telling kids of the Empire what a grand thing it is to belong to the best species of mankind. The Little Match-girl is there, apparently telling us that earthly disorders like injustice and poverty do not matter so much in the end because a cosmic reward awaits us all. Horatio, defender of the bridge is there to show the depth of patriotic courage. I'm sure there was at least one Shakespearean sonnet too. This author has of course, been admired continuously since he lived, but not always in the same way. My impression is that when I was a kid, we were supposed to see Shakespeare as a moral writer - which he certainly was not. Probably no great author has been less inclined to promote a point of view or persuade on behalf of an ideal, or weave a lesson into his text than this one. Yet I think it is fair to say that such passages of his work as we were given to read were presented as just such instruction. Same with the Bible.

No child understands this fact: every book that's ever been written has an "ethos" - a cultural, historical background that has everything to do with its meaning. Teachers are supposed to know this, but I never felt that any of mine did - perhaps with a couple of later exceptions. A child's disability in this respect makes it possible to market all sorts of messages using texts that really have nothing to say, or who's real meaning is much more complex than the one in the front row. Thus it was at our school. We had to first absorb, then later reject many messages about important stuff, just because some old guy in an office somewhere thought he knew best. I've often thought about the prejudices that abound in any society: how do they start? how are they spread? how do they endure? why do some survive and others decay? and why are they so hard to correct? It may be that from age 0 to 5, we get most ideas from home; after that, from school. Schools should be careful.



The end at Corinda school came for me with the “scholarship” exam in December 1957. This had been the terminus of elementary school for at least a couple of generations. My parents made a considerable sacrifice to send me to father’s old school, Brisbane Grammar, a collection of old stone buildings in Victorian colonial gothic style on the corner of College Road and Gregory Terrace. To tell the truth, it hadn’t changed much since Dad’s time there, though it’s very different now. Even a couple of teachers were the same - perhaps a little crankier. It was a step towards real learning. I undertook chemistry and physics and German language - all new stuff - as well as maths and the standard humanities, English, history & geography. For some conventional reason, biology was thought suitable only for girls, and was not taught there, or at any boys school, as far as I know.

Finding science in the classroom was exciting. We split our time between instruction and experiment and demonstration, so we probably got a sort of feel for the way scientific knowledge is created, but not a very strong one. After all, there’s only so much a teacher can do to show a class how our scientific understanding was gained and how new discoveries are made. A lot came across as just stuff to remember. In recent times this issue has been discussed a lot - how teaching science as a body of received knowledge without teaching its peculiar method and process of discovery has weakened scientific literacy and insight in our societies; how this kind of ignorance has big consequences; and how it might be fixed.

One of the bad results of poor science teaching is the space it leaves for the idea that science is a narrow, materialist mode of understanding; that we shouldn’t allow it to usurp older, deeper modes that comprehend the non-material contents of culture, particularly its values. This feeling that science is the enemy of *real* truth, a pretender, leads to all sorts of dangerous stuff - perceived conflict between science and religion, the false belief that we can have the technological benefits of science without absorbing what it tells us about natural and human reality, ignorant opposition to scientific bad news, and much more. So I have often thought about those classrooms at the Grammar School and what really went into our heads there.

I learned that the constituents of atoms are like little hard balls - electrons whizzing round nuclei at high speed (like a tennis ball spinning round St Paul’s cathedral at a mile distant, one teacher explained. Nothing about quantum & nothing about relativity.) We learned Newtonian mechanics, very much the way Galileo had discovered it 350 years before; we learned trigonometry from a book very similar to the one Euclid left to us 2,300 years before.

We read *David Copperfield*, and then *Vanity Fair*; both fine novels, but hardly the most relevant or instructive for a bunch of antipodean youths. We studied first *The Merchant of Venice*, and then *Macbeth*; we looked into colonial history, and we must have added something to our geographical knowledge, though what it was I could not say. On the whole, I think it would be fair to say the teachers were sort of tired. I only remember one who ever claimed his subject was really interesting; and only one who stepped out of his role and treated his students like acolytes. Maybe that's all we should expect from a system like this - but at any rate this one man made a lasting impression on me and probably had life-long effects on many boys.

Science is a curious thing. Like many of the best human inventions, it is liberal, in the sense that it only really thrives under conditions of freedom. Its practitioners need to be able to imagine new possibilities and test them, and to follow the evidence wherever it leads. They need open conversation with their colleagues, and steady support from institutions like universities, and the society at large. If what they find tells against some established belief or practice or orthodoxy or interest, they must be free to pursue the consequences without restraint or opposition. And the field of science should be open to all people of imagination, whether they train in one of its disciplines or not. That's why science communication is so important; we don't want a big sector of society terribly ignorant of what science knows or how it operates.

To all people who exercise their curiosity with no stake in the outcome, science is invigorating - indeed, liberating. It opens doors of imagination like nothing else. It can make old mysteries plain, and it can make them more wonderful by giving them real content. No discovery of nature diminishes her wonder, as any scientist knows. In its path through the fields of ignorance that lay in its way, it has revealed for us marvels such as no man could have dreamed. But in the end it can have no effect whatever upon the mystery of mysteries - the riddle of existence. This remains exactly as it always was because science has no tools that will operate on it and nothing to say. Its competitors in the explanation business however still have a great deal to say - but less than they once did, and less convincingly. Confrontation with science is the best possible way to expose humbug, unjust privilege, claims to power disguised as esoteric knowledge, and all kinds of authority. Remember the Pope's exhortation to his aristocrats? Many people have understood that the freedom of science and the success of democracy must have been linked, and so they have been.

I rode to school on the train from Oxley station to Roma Street, then walked through the old produce market which was strung out next to the rail-shunting yards there, dodging the trucks laden with onions & lettuce, climbed a ladder

under the coal hoppers into Albert Park, and strolled under the old trees to the school gates. In those days the whole school could assemble in the Great Hall, built as a memorial to old boys who died in the great war, with its soaring gabled roof and stained lancet windows. There the Head, a sour sort of man who made you wonder why he had ever gone into the teaching game, made pronouncements, and we celebrated the success of our fellows as if it belonged to us all. The hall had a resonant organ whose sound I can vaguely recall - so we must have sung hymns in there too. And on occasion we were enjoined to witness the humiliation of one who had gone astray. I never escaped the impression that beneath his pained protestations, the Head actually quite enjoyed this kind of thing.

Every Monday, the grey and blue school uniform was exchanged for the khaki of the army cadets - in summer a regular army shirt and trousers; in winter a thick brown woollen dress uniform just like the one used in the first world war. And just as in previous wars, the army spent a lot of time with boot polish, shiny brass and fresh dressed webbing. These tokens of discipline were inspected with great regularity and you had to spend a bit of time on Sunday seeing to it that your uniform shone where it counted, and its creases were in the right places. Monday afternoon, you were expected to exhibit a soldierly bearing and to carry your arms in approved style. Most cadet time was parade drill - at least that's the way I remember it. Each year around November the cadets would stage a sort of parade on the main oval, with parents and relations watching from the stands as we performed marching with whatever precision we could muster after long practice.

After the parade, cadet units would stage a kind of "mock battle" using the weapons we'd been trained for, with lots of smoke and noise, really quite like what I imagine a movie set would be like. After a year or so as an infantryman I elected to join the machine-gun platoon and learn how to use the Vickers gun. This venerable device of war had been adopted in the British army in 1912. It was then on its last legs, replaced soon after by much more modern and efficient weapons. Nevertheless we learned to operate it in a crew of three - one to fire, one to manage the ammunition supply, and one to wait slightly in the rear in case of a casualty and to fetch water. The gun's barrel, from firing so rapidly had to be cooled by enclosing it in a water jacket. After a while, the water would get too hot to do its job, and then fresh cool water had to be brought in cans. Without this precaution, the barrel would melt.

On receiving an order, the first and second men would grab the gun and its heavy tripod respectively, rush forward and put the two pieces together, whereupon the third man would rush out with the water can and hose, connecting it to the jacket. In operation, ammunition was fed from a fabric belt folded into a box on the ground on the left side of the gun. Number two would lie prone beside this box

ensuring no snags fouled its smooth passage to the intake on the side of the action. His position placed his right ear next to the gun's chamber, so inevitably after a bit of firing, he would retire with ringing in the ears - certainly one of them. In those days, nobody, least of all the army thought anything about preventable deafness.

Although the Vickers had a reputation for reliability in service, you had to know all about the ways it could go wrong, and how to fix them - fast. At the heart of the mechanism was a compact device called the "lock". It was just like one of those puzzles that need to be assembled and taken apart in exactly the right order - and indeed it was a mechanical wonder, performing several functions on the firing pin and belt feed synchronously - but it seemed (at least to us) to be very liable to malfunction. All possible modes of failure had long since been named and catalogued, together with their remedies, and we had to learn them all. After a year of this training you had to be able to do whatever was demanded with a blindfold on. An instructor would hand you a lock with a certain problem and you had to fix it in the dark against a stop-watch. This was the pinnacle of my achievements as a fighting man.

Each year in winter the army took all the cadets to Greenbank for a week's camp. The army had a depot and reserve there and a lot of bush for training exercises. We lived in tents pitched in a sort of village and slept under army blankets on a palliasse, a flat bag you filled with straw. We ate army food served in a mess tent, showered under cold water from a perforated bucket, and evacuated in a latrine. Even here, there was a lot of interest in getting details right. An inspection would determine if your bedding was correctly folded and flat, your rifle clean, boots shiny and your uniform just so. All the same these camps were good for one thing. We would go hiking for a few days with our stuff in packs, rifles shouldered, living off rations and camping under ponchos. At various stages of the exercise, we'd be engaged by a mock enemy, firing blanks that were issued in limited quantity and manoeuvring according to our orders.

Although it was against orders, I used to collect the empty .303 cartridges as they fell into the bush, and bring them home concealed at the bottom of my kit-bag, to make various kinds of bombs. In those days you could walk up a street in Milton after school to Selby's, the firm that supplied laboratory gear and chemicals to schools, and get from them all the stuff you needed to make interesting explosives and many other things. I had a little shelter in the back garden I used as a lab, preparing incendiary mixtures for packing into those brass rifle cartridges. No doubt this was a bit dangerous. No doubt other school-boys, doing the same thing have been hurt. The issue is moot now because today no school boy could buy

those things, and perhaps if one were to try, the only effect would be to alert the anti-terrorism authorities.

Maybe this raises a question about how much safety is enough. Maybe the question is how dangerous it is to live in a prosperous society like ours. However that may be, it is certain that kids now live with a sense of hazard that was simply missing 60 years ago. An enormous amount of public policy, and private precaution, as well as masses of attention and legal effort are devoted to this, on the assumption that there is a duty to be constantly vigilant in discovering and preventing every danger that can be remedied. Is that too much of a good thing? Might there be any bad effects on our collective understanding of the concept of responsibility? That might be worth thinking about.

Sometimes I think the incredible privilege of living in a wealthy country and an age remarkable for its many social and technological advances has acted like a narcotic on us, so that we've forgotten what it might otherwise have been like, and what it might be like again if we do not take care of the state that has been built for us by our industrious ancestors. The fact is, modern prosperity - the amazing riches of the second half of the twentieth century - is due to both industry and good fortune. Neither could have produced this miracle without the other. That being so, if we don't keep track of the sources of our welfare and properly account for any costs it might bring, we shall surely lose it - perhaps as quickly as it was given.

How is this gloomy reflection derived from boys making bombs 50 years ago? you might ask. It's a long story and I might defer it until later. But consider this. In 1950 when I was in the first grade, 2.5 billion humans lived on the Earth - about 500 times as many as had lived during the long ages when we all survived by hunting and foraging. By 1987 that number had doubled, and since then another 2 billion have been added. You might think that with such vast numbers of people all requiring food and shelter, the general standard of life would have declined, but no - for hundreds of millions, it rose to levels of comfort and security that would have been unimaginable not so long ago. How was this possible? How did we squeeze so much more sustenance and wealth from the old Earth in such a short time? In a word: energy. We found many new ways to release the fossil sunshine trapped in oil and coal and gas.

And as our societies grew more complex and crowded, we devoted more and more of that energy to upholding and maintaining the fantastic array of devices and institutions needed to keep them running. So, to take a very detached view of things, you could say we are a bit like a termite colony, very nearly fully occupied with looking after the structures we've built, heads down, unaware of the light of

day or the starry sky, intimately familiar with the tasks at hand, and deeply convinced we are having the best of all possible times. And yet ... we are not termites, not at all. We are the only creatures alive on Earth who can imagine our own state and even contemplate our existence and extinction. We are self-aware, a condition that in former times gave us a need for certain practices and habits, but which now, in their absence, brings confusion, alienation, and dismay. It looks just as if our anxiety has the same source as our success. That is strange.

I said there was one teacher at the Grammar school who made a life-long impression on me. He belonged to a pioneering family from the Beaudesert district, had an Oxford degree, if I remember correctly, and literary tastes. He also cared about cricket and rowing, and cadets. He could be irascible in class - but then, we could be pretty exasperating too. I'm confident he, possibly alone of all the teachers there, understood the nobility of his profession and wished for a mentor's role with his students. I know this because in our senior year, he established something he called the "Athene Club". Membership was by invitation. The club met monthly in the library when long into the evening we would discuss a paper read by one of the company on some subject he had prepared. Occasionally we would retire to the coffee lounge in a basement off Queen Street, a place with a seedy reputation, where you were served by a colourful lady who, rumour had it, was an actual prostitute.

I have never forgotten the feeling that came with the trust and confidence of this man, expressed this way, nor the sense of peering into the world of manhood, the intellectual world, from the protected state of an adolescent. It was just a tiny bit reckless, and very exhilarating. I read a paper on extra-terrestrial life, which, I suspected even then was rather feeble; but I remember best the evening we discussed questions raised by a brilliant boy who was interested in some metaphysical problems. It was my first philosophical inquiry. Before that evening I had no idea that such a fascinating country lay all before me awaiting the traveller's curiosity, nor that many crooked ways had already been explored through its vales and jungles.

I was given a ukulele for Christmas once, and before long could regale visitors with old songs. After a while I learned to play the guitar, and with my cousin Phil Gough, performed an act at the school concert. At this time, I felt rather serious about religion. I taught a class at Sunday school and tried to make my chaotic inner life conform to the model provided by the divine word. I never succeeded - something it was hard to admit at the time, but which I knew very well. Our little concert band was invited to play at a sort of summer camp run by the Methodist church at Southport. The campers occupied a big old rambling house there, and in the evenings, we would make music in a hall in Surfers Paradise for the

entertainment of the youngsters who filled the place during the holidays in January. Between acts, we were supposed to engage them in conversation, and if possible raise the subject of redemption through the power of the Lord.

But by then, my attachment to religion had become complicated. I entertained doubts, and so was a compromised advocate. I can confidently say I never saved a soul there. But I had a second encounter with philosophy. It was due to a clergyman who supervised the campers. During the hot summer afternoons, when we were not rehearsing, they organized a few activities to keep us occupied - I guess most of them were part of the never-ending effort to discover the true and full meaning of that old textual mystery, the Bible. But this man offered an introduction to philosophy, based on *The Story of Philosophy*, a lovely book by the indefatigable Will Durant. This book, and the much longer *The Story of Civilization*, written with his wife, did more than any other to establish the popularity and orthodoxy of what has been called the “grand narrative” - the story that Western civilization with its chief virtues, the values of liberty and democracy, is due to a progressive trajectory of human affairs which began in Athens 2,500 years ago.

The narrative mixes a lot of truth with a lot of hope, and rather simplifies a story with many complications that I knew nothing about; but nonetheless, *The Story of Philosophy* was an excellent way to meet the subject and characters of philosophy, and I remain grateful to that young and open-minded fellow for his encouragement and insight. In ancient times, when Will Durant’s story began, every kind of systematic enquiry was called philosophy - it was the adventure of the mind, invented goodness knows when, but known to us since Greek times, and hence owing a lot to Greek models and perspectives until this day. Now, though, much of what Aristotle treated as philosophy is something else - science or sociology or politics - and what is left for philosophers to do is a bit like left-overs: stuff that doesn’t yield much to empirical methods.

Take the study of language for example. There’s a collection of disciplines today that investigate all sorts of things about this. You can use clever machines to analyze speech sounds in great detail; you can study speech pathology; you can survey speakers to learn about language usages and linguistic change. You can study the way language is processed in the brain; and you can use various sources to investigate language history. But when all this is done, there are still some issues left. The question, for example, of how language generates and transmits meaning - and what is meaning anyway? This is called philosophical semantics to distinguish it from the kind of semantics that is done with experimental subjects and scientist’s methods.

It's the same with many of the old philosophical topics - aesthetics, ethics, politics, and so on, and there's even a branch called the philosophy of science which tries to understand how science works. Unless you've had reason to consider this, it might look like a waste of time, but in fact, being interested in the inner processes of science helps us decide when it's doing its job, what it can and can't do, and when and if it goes astray. That really is useful. The piece of old philosophy that's pretty much still wide open is metaphysics, or sometimes just called ontology - questions about causes. The reason it's still alive and well is that we can't do without it. You may not think it's got anything to do with you, and you might never give it a thought, but you can't escape having some commitment to a whole bunch of metaphysical claims - at least not unless you're in a coma. We are all born with certain mental powers and potentialities. As we grow up in our society, these are guided and supplied with contents - largely unconscious beliefs about what's what and how things work. Philosophers love to peer into these to try to unravel them, and then provide justifications if they can.

After Will Durant's advice, I read some of Plato's dialogues, looking for the places where the old thinker teased out with uncanny acumen those questions and puzzles that still bother us today. It's a marvel how these imaginary conversations, set down so long ago, are fresh and full of life, just as if they'd been recorded yesterday. A great and subtle mind here sorts through what was then known about everything, without fear or prejudice, so persuasively that Will Durant's vision of the birth of Western civilization at this very place and time can be pretty much taken for granted. Of course, Plato had his opinions too, something I learned later, but remarkably, when his enquiry led him to a contradiction, he admitted as much without embarrassment - something too few professionals emulate.

About this time, members of the opposite gender started to seem more interesting. I must have been a clumsy suitor, for I can still remember making the resolution to ask a girl to the school dance, surreptitiously observing her on the train journey, leaving the carriage at her station, and then walking all the way home after my nerve failed. But I formed an alliance with one girl at the church - a rather earnest connection, in which there was more talk of spiritual things than of love. Her mother was a widow, and in her house I heard for the first time the music of Bach. She had a recording of the St Matthew Passion directed by the great Willem Mengelberg, and as I listened to this, the sense of musical architecture and drama first woke up. Alas, this good woman was alarmed at my apostasy, even then beyond recall, and after a time, her disappointment was complete - I abandoned the faith of my childhood; you could say it withered under a barrage of impertinent challenges, and never recovered.

What shall I say about this legacy now? Is it the case that every man is susceptible to religious conversion for the duration of his life? Where does one go after parting with childish notions of the divine, and does that baggage so easily acquired weigh upon the shoulders for ever? Do we ever attain the level plateau from which to regard the biggest questions without rancour or regret? What elixir can we depend on to clear our eyes and steady our judgement on these, our deepest concerns - we, the self-conscious animal?

In a prosaic frame of mind, I can merely say that no proposition in favour of doctrinal religion has seemed persuasive to me since then, nor can I imagine any that would - the weight of evidence that religion is a human phenomenon is too great. I don't think it is an insignificant human phenomenon by any means, but I do think that as it has assumed more of an institutional character as human societies evolved more and more complex organizations, loyalty and power have become so confounded that it's impossible to say what it is the churches really exist for. The odd situation as I see it is that many good people belong, and much good comes from them, but insofar as they pursue collective and institutional goals, they can be relied on to do grave harm - not all the time, but always sooner or later. One guy seems to have understood this long ago. He made it perfectly clear, and he set a transparent example, yet it proved impossible to follow. No one since has had any better luck. His name was Francis. Some have called him the last Christian.

I guess I was still at school when we first saw Boonaroo, a tiny place on the shore of the Great Sandy Strait, where you looked across at Fraser Island. Mum & Dad got together with old friends to buy what was styled "Boonaroo House", a very old homestead made from hewn ti-tree slabs sometime in the 1880's. It had a hipped red iron roof for its length, a verandah in front, rain water tanks, a hanging bucket shower, and one of those outhouses for a toilet. You lit a kerosene lamp at night, just like the old-timers had done. The cracks between the slabs were covered by old newspapers. There was an old wood stove for cooking and warming the place a bit in winter. You slept at night on old iron beds - out on the veranda if there was a cooling breeze.

There were perhaps a dozen or so houses there, including the one just built by Les Hoyle, the guy who sold Mum and Dad the old house. It reminded me right away of Steinbeck's Monterey - somehow touched by myth - a place that yielded small revelations, a bit fictional. Nearby lived Ernie the oysterman. He had a lease on the beds off the north side of Tuan Creek estuary and the little islands out in the Strait. We would accompany him collecting them, then prise them open at a rough deck in front of his place. I wasn't too interested in eating oysters then, but Mum and Dad thought it was heaven. I remember so well those days when squalls of

slanting rain would pass along the Strait, and then engulf us as we bent over the shells, Ernie and me, filling sacks, the sun casting a long halo on that magic island. It really felt like you had passed an enchanted door and arrived in a new-born, glowing world, radiant in its perfection.

I would sometimes, later on, as an adolescent, hitch-hike to Maryborough, then either hitch or walk down the rough dirt road to Boonaroo, sometimes with a student friend, sometimes alone. You don't need to be fully grown up to know a natural 'gentleman', and I understood alright that our friend Ernie was one of those. He was Polynesian (colloquially, a Kanaka), but he lived in that old house with a Caucasian lady, Dorrie, known for her irascibility. Back then, such a household would not have been acknowledged by polite folks, but it was Boonaroo, and I think my parents took a tiny bit of vicarious pleasure in bending this taboo. Ernie's person, his charmed way of life - and the oysters - seemed to conjoin in this little wonder-world where we had many an escape, until sometime around 1970, Dad sold it. The old house was taken down, and now, if you go there, none of that magic remains.

When it came time, towards the end of school, to think about a career, I chose, rather indifferently, to apply to the faculty of medicine. I can only think of two reasons for this decision now: one was my uncle, who was a sympathetic man and a hard-working gynaecologist; the other was AJ Cronin's novel *The Citadel*, about the disillusionment and redemption of a young doctor. I've never looked at the book since, but I suspect it would not strike me as powerful enough to steer one's future by. But there it is. I can't say my choice of profession was founded on close deliberation or keen idealism, rather a whiff from the winds of fortune and the good example of my relation.

These choices seem to have been much easier then. You could line up the professions, and look them over, not so very differently from the way it was done in say Dickens' time - army, church, law, medicine, finance, politics, *etc.* Once in, you expected to stay for life. There was no competition for entry. Anyone who passed the matriculation standard could enrol in the first year. They controlled the size of the graduating class by failing about half the first year and another half of second. The course was modelled after the British one, from early in the twentieth century: six years beginning with three "pre-clinical" years of basic stuff like biochemistry & biology; then anatomy & physiology; then three years of pathology and the various clinical disciplines - surgery, medicine, paediatrics and so on. I used to ride a bike from Corinda to St Lucia for a year or two, fit as a whippet and keen on the work. Then, bit by bit I fell into wayward habits. I learned the taste of whiskey and nice German cigarettes; I began to care for the

University cinema club and the company of dissolute friends more than the dissecting room. Like students everywhere, I liked hours of earnest talk, late nights and reading anything but textbooks.

And so I earned a post in 3rd year anatomy. I was away in the South hitch-hiking when I got the news and had to come home to get ready for the January exam. My parents were genuinely troubled, not knowing what had gotten into me. I guess they feared some sort of implosion - that I was about to throw away my chances and slide into decrepitude and mediocrity. In fact, what I thought I wanted to do was go to sea for a while. All that was really wrong with me was a young man's regret that he has not seen all the world. Right then, it seemed that memorizing the names of countless muscles, nerves and veins was the most tedious thing imaginable, an impossible distraction from what really counted - discovering what lay over every horizon. I wasn't just restless though. I was self-absorbed, socially inept, and at a loss about my chosen profession. I was less than half way to it, and had never met a patient. I hadn't the faintest idea what I was in for, or what doctoring would be like.

I went to live in a little flat in Spring Hill after that, a mile from the Royal Brisbane Hospital, so I could easily walk there across Victoria Park. That's where I began to get an idea of what I had chosen to do.

The craft of physician is something special. It is, for all we know, the most ancient vocational specialization of all, its beginnings well and truly lost in the mists of the remote human past. Societies have always endowed medicine men with some potent social privileges - the grant of esoteric knowledge; exclusive license to apply diagnostic methods and therapies; access to intimacies and vulnerabilities denied to others; power to administer healing and predict and determine the course of illness. These are granted in return for certain strictures - the doctor is expected to make himself available; he must use his privileged status responsibly, giving priority to his patients' interest above all, and guarding the confidences trusted to him. He must keep his skill up-to-date, and understand his limitations. Very gradually I came to understand some of this, as we got familiar with the hospital and its inhabitants, and discovered the peculiar rewards of clinical problem-solving.

In the 1960's Tasmania still didn't have a medical school, so students from there were fitted into the second year of various mainland schools instead. In this way I became friends with a student from Hobart. In the summer vacation, instead of picking fruit in the orchards along the Murray, as I'd done the year before, I went to Hobart. Nobody worried much about legal liability then, and it was normal for medical students to pick up vacation work in the wards. For a few weeks I worked

as a nurse - an old-fashioned one, scrubbing, emptying pans, making beds and chatting with the patients. The staff physicians and surgeons invited us to assist at procedures, so you could learn quite a bit. When I finished there, I roamed over the island State, sometime tracing the footsteps of my grandfather who had done survey work in the Central Highlands 50 years before. The following year, I was in Tasmania again, in time for my friend's wedding in the handsome church of St Matthew in the old Derwent Valley town of New Norfolk.

Much later, I discovered my friend's house in Sandy Bay Road was in the same street where my father lived about the time he started school, around 1925. So he and I had trod the same paths next to the estuary and inhaled the same Southern Ocean scent that blows over the town under Mt Wellington's shadow - not through continuity, but coincidence. In the northern Tasmanian town of Devonport there lived at that time my father's aunt Blodwen and her husband Charles Brayne, a retired British gentleman from the colonial civil service. He was a cultivated and generous man of whom I had fond memories from their occasional visits to my grandparents when I was a child. I probably got a bit tired of hitch-hiking and plain food, so I dropped in to see them. This resulted in a good feed and a warm bed, and also a piece of advice that for some reason has outlasted most of the others I ever received.

Uncle Charles was explaining how he came to settle in that place. Some decisions, he said, are too large for deliberation - like where to live and whom to marry. You must approach these with a sort of open state of mind and allow intuitions to do their part. Feeling and judgement, he seemed to say, need each other most when the stakes are high. If that is what he meant, I've come to see (and probably sensed at the time) that he had spoken a profound truth - one that is neglected very often despite its confirmation by many studies in psychology and neuroscience.

My miniature household in Victoria St Springhill ran in a sort of quasi-Bohemian style - domestically chaotic, intermittently studious, the scene of many late-night revels, parleys and concerts - it closed some time in my final year, when I returned to Rathlyn Avenue to prepare for my exams. I remember the evening Dad called to say I had passed the finals. I had taken my mother and the family car to Sydney to see Rhyll who lived there for a while. We were at the house of my mother's cousin Phyl Ryan, with her daughter Jenny and her Hungarian husband, Stephen. I remember even now faintly recognizing that with that bit of news, a much-postponed event was now inevitable - my irrevocable entry into the grown-up world. And so it came to pass. Not without mishap and not without regret, but over the next few years I came to understand for the first time, later than almost everyone who hadn't been a medical student, what was entailed in the exercise of

responsibility. Many times since I have wished I had learned these things sooner and more thoroughly.

I went to work at my first real job, junior resident at Ipswich hospital, in January 1968. The place was just emerging from a long spell of administrative neglect - not all benign; my boss was the young and clever surgeon Michael O'Rourke, recently returned from the Mayo Clinic (in those days, a pretty big deal) and there I learned the basics of my trade. It must seem strange, but it was very true that students graduated with a weak apprenticeship in the actual business of taking responsibility for clinic decisions. Good students (I was not one of those) could start their practitioner's life with a pretty solid understanding of the facts of the clinical world, and quickly move into the role of an executive in that esoteric space. This was the route to excellence imagined by the creators of our medical education system - and it reliably reproduced practitioners moulded by its preferences and ideals. That's the biggest reason it is a dependably conservative profession. But if you stepped out with a lot to learn about clinical phenomena, as I did, the road to competence is longer.

It is also more interesting. Only long afterwards I understood why. The fact of the matter is that the old system which sought to build knowledge of the body and its ailments layer by layer, beginning with dead stuff and ending with the long-suffering patients was always an inefficient way to make doctors. I guess it was an attempt to incorporate the sciences of the body into clinical apprenticeship - something that only became an issue towards the end of the nineteenth century. The much older tradition of teaching the art and science of the clinic in the consulting room and by the bedside had been demoted for reasons that turned out not to be very salient. They have since been reassessed. For me, the effect was that I felt as if I learned more in that one year of 1968 than I had in the six before. Of course, you can take in a lot by working hard for a year, but you can't develop balanced judgements or reliable techniques or proper humility or anything like a large repertoire of well-rehearsed responses to clinical problems. You're still a beginner - but you may not know this as keenly as you should.

The following year I began the fulfilment of obligations that came with my scholarship - several years of country service. In the new year of 1969, my instructions were to drive to Mareeba and there undertake the duties of Medical Superintendent of the town's small hospital. Fortunately, I wasn't alone. One of my graduating classmates joined me there. I had hardly stepped out of my car after driving the thousand miles, when an ebullient Indian gentleman accosted me. Almost breathlessly, he bade me hasten. He needed someone to anaesthetize his patient while he removed the appendix. So my gear stayed in the car while I did my first work as an unsupervised practitioner.

This man incidentally provided a useful lesson. He held a surgeon's qualification from a British school which was a bit notorious for granting accreditation too freely. It didn't take long to discover that he had a well deserved reputation for recklessness. In time, long after I was there, and perhaps after one too many surgical misadventures, he left the town and ran a private hospital in Brisbane which specialized in unconventional methods and procedures. In due course and under the shadow of scandal, this venture too was closed to him. Perhaps he is now a real estate tycoon. The lesson was this: the craft of surgery may be ever so engaging and fascinating, or empowering and enriching, for the practitioner - but its only true *raison d'être* is the welfare of patients, and that is best served by patience - reticence even - thorough mastery of technique, conservative judgements (most of the time) and plain, boring repetitive procedural work. You want your surgeon to have the sort of courage that can keep him calm and effective in an emergency, but you also want a fully restrained trigger finger, and if possible, no less empathy than from his colleagues in less dramatic lines of work.

The way it turned out, I only stayed a month in Mareeba, and spent the rest of the year traveling from one country job to another, putting in a month while the incumbent took a holiday. In this way I saw a bit of the State, and quite a bit of country practice. As a way of learning the job, it left a bit to be desired - often there was no one to consult and no one to oversee what I did - but this was considered at the time to be a good, if stressful, way to quickly acquire a full range of clinical competencies. If you can swim in the deep end (without doing too much harm) then you might be allowed back in the shallow end when it came time to train for a clinical speciality. In July that year I went to relieve the only doctor in Winton, a town in the north-west famous for producing lots of fine wool, and there occurred a couple of fateful meetings. It was a time of drought, and during the month a film crew from ABC television came to town to make a documentary on its effects. One local bloke who featured in the film because he had built a water conservation system on his place was Charlie Phillott.

Now I know him a lot better it's possible to say that my first impression was correct: he's an unusual fellow - laconic and practical like most of his colleagues in the sheep business, but also thoughtful, polite and engaging in conversation. There was something about him that gave an impression of earnest moral commitment. His attachment to the idea of land stewardship was obvious and a bit unusual for farmers at the time. He had only a little of the farmers' prejudice that everything good is in the bush; his curiosity about the wide world - politics, commerce, science, travel - was real; and he is one of those people for whom you can say without a doubt that a bit more education would surely have propelled him into very different fields and woken dormant talents. He very kindly invited me to visit

his place, Carisbrooke, which I did in the company of another interesting Winton man, Peter Knowles.

It so happened that my parents had just returned from a trip to Asia and Europe. Dad had sent me the camera he picked up in Hong Kong, my first - a Pentax Spotmatic which was to last me the next 30 years. I was keen as mustard, taking pictures of everything in Winton. Peter was a grazier, but also a very good photographer. His first book had just been published, a collection of images of western Queensland, its landscapes, wildlife, plants and people, together with his own narrative. This was lucky. He was my first and last photography teacher and I've been grateful to him ever since.

A bit later that year, I went to Biloela for a month, and at the picnic races met Charlie's little sister Jill, recently married to an agricultural scientist in the town. I had no idea that, a few months after that, her sister Rhonda would be there working at the small hospital, regaled by stories of the boisterous locum who'd turned the medical superintendent's house into a scene of wild parties for a few weeks. Alas, it was true. Around this time I was none too careful about amusements. It took a year or two to wise up, but in the end I seemed to get over the fascination with "good times" and found better things to do. Just as well.



Near the end of 1969 I went to the little town of Quilpie for a month. The guy there was cheesed off with the place - a feeling reciprocated by the townsfolk - and his tenure was due to finish after Christmas. When I was about to leave, some people from the hospital board invited me to apply for the vacant job. It was an arrangement that is still fairly common in rural Queensland: you act as a part-time public employee, the hospital medical superintendent, and you use the rest of your time as a private practitioner, living in a house and working in offices provided by the hospital board. Being a pretty remote place, it wasn't popular, so all I had to do to accept this

invitation was advise the Health Department about my choice.

I liked the place almost as soon as I first saw it - something about its village scale, its situation at the end of the railway line, the Bulloo River water holes almost within sight of the hospital verandah, the vast stretches of flat land all round, and the unknown and empty spaces to the west. And the locals appeared most attractive and interesting. I think I probably also liked the idea of practicing alone, somehow. I wasn't as concerned about the risks of improvisation as I should have been - after all I was still a novice clinician, many years short of thorough competence - but standards were different then. It's amazing to reflect how different. For example it was considered perfectly proper to administer a sort of quasi-general anaesthetic using some intravenous stuff, or to have the matron look after an ether anaesthetic while you did the surgery. Today, doing either of those things would be gravely negligent.

The road from Charleville, the only one connecting Quilpie with civilization, was a terrible stony track, dusty and rough in dry weather, impossibly boggy in wet. It took at least three hours of bone-shaking concentration to drive, and its dangers caused many accidents. There was no aerial ambulance in those days - you were expected to be able to manage everything except major trauma or emergencies. The board owned an ambulance. The man who drove it, Jimmy Heinemann, was also the hospital wardsman and ground-keeper. Born 60 years before, in the shade of a bullock wagon somewhere on the track, he had spent the first half of his life as a teamster like his father, and he knew every trail and waterhole in the district. As time went by I learned from him how to recognize and name plants, trees and birds, and listened to many stories about earlier times.

Each Tuesday, Jimmy and I would set off after a ward-round for Adavale, the remnant of a once-flourishing township 60 miles up-river. This was the original outpost on the upper Bulloo, established long before Quilpie; but due to some political accident, the rail line, when it was built in the 1930s, went to the insignificant camp further south. Adavale never got over this rebuff. While Quilpie grew into a proper town, nourished by the traffic of drovers and their herds of channel-country cattle, and the trains loaded with precious wool-bales, the elder place eroded and shrank, so that by the time I was a regular visitor, it looked strangely like an abandoned movie-set. Most allotments had been vacated of their buildings, in no particular sequence, so that those left behind stood apart and lonely.

We met a group of locals at what was once the hospital. Its neighbours long gone, this modest building, empty and unused save for our brief activity each week, its verandahs creaking, floors dusty, windows coated with grime and cobwebs,

witnessed the stories of sickness of those district people who wanted to save the dusty journey to town. I always thought, perhaps unfairly, that these people seemed to share somehow in the forlorn atmosphere of their little town, like a permanent bereavement. In fact I used to visit the old cemetery across the clay-pan now and then to take pictures. Its barren solitude and leaning monuments, rusting borders, broken floral vessels and brittle brown weeds seemed to speak of the wreckage of human enterprises in a voice that matched the nearly abandoned town.

Often, on the way back, we would take a track that Jimmy knew from his days on the wagons, and visit some place along the river he remembered. Poking around like this, I saw some precious sights like flights of Major Mitchell cockatoos with coral beneath their wings and a crown of fire upon their outstretched necks, great flocks of emerald budgerigars flashing like speeding jewels as they turned and twisted, and brolgas dancing. One time, by the edge of a little lagoon, I climbed into a big old coolibah with my camera and waited to photograph a pair of nesting brolgas. I fixed up a dark-room in my house, and worked away producing prints, gradually learning by trial this essential photographic skill. Once in a while I'd be asked to photograph someone's wedding.

Even small towns usually had a pharmacy in those days, but Quiplie was small enough to have missed out. It was, besides, 'at the end of the line', a predicament which guaranteed it a fair share of eccentric, lonesome, thirsty citizens - not the most reassuring environment for investing professional capital. But as it happened, the pharmacy was owned and run by Des Burton, who's company I found fascinating and rewarding. Most days I would call at the shop after finishing at the hospital and before my clinic started, to have a coffee. Des had taken what he called the "geographical cure" for alcoholism, traveling to the end of the line and embarking on what might have been a typical Quilpie personal tragedy. But as luck had it he encountered there a policeman who convinced him to join AA. By the time I arrived he'd been off the grog a couple of years and was putting his considerable energy into a new opal business.

We spent many hours together in the back of the pharmacy surrounded by the debris of opal boulders, talking about many things - but often about the new life of discovery he had made as a sober person, husband and father. He was remarkably wise in many ways, kind, generous and attentive. I shared many grateful meals at his home, and many trips out to the opal camps near Eromanga. I still have a jar of beautiful specimen stones he mounted for me when I left town eventually. He was best man when we were married. He died suddenly at the age of 52, walking on the beach at Surfers Paradise, where he and Valmae had moved after their kids had grown up and left.

The other man I spent a lot of time with at Quilpie was Keith Edwards, the bush brother. Folks with spiritual needs in the far South-West were looked after by a priest (if you were catholic) and brother Keith if you weren't. Apparently the bush brotherhood was started by some concerned Anglican clergy earlier in the century in a missionary spirit, to supply dedicated ordained men to the great sparsely inhabited spaces. So that's what they did. The brothers had to renounce marriage for their term, and undertake to travel from their bases to all the remote hamlets and stations where there were souls in need of sustenance. My friend was a cultured fellow from Victoria who had seen something of the world, enjoyed literature and music, and was, I dare say, in need of congenial company. In due course he was the celebrant at our wedding at Mundoolun.

In the winter of my second year in Quilpie, my neighbour the mechanic proposed a trip to Innamincka. The drought had ended that summer, Cooper Creek had flooded, and I suddenly felt the lure of this wide unknown country. So I got a week off, we stuck some gear and fuel onto his tow-truck, and one afternoon, we set off on the road to the west. I'll never forget the scene, late that day, coming to a rise on the road from Eromanga to Durham Downs and looking down on the Cooper flood-plain, seeing the glint of the lowering sun on the distant water, the glow all over that wide green vale, the enormous empty sky, reddening below and shining above, and the great deep silence of evening covering it all. Next day, we came to the crossing at Durham, but finding the water too deep, passed on down to Karmona where we could ford the main channel.

Two old fellows lived there then, one of whom was plaiting a raw-hide rope as we rolled up. I don't think he had too many visitors, certainly not since the flood - just the same he was taciturn to a fault, barely able to find a few monosyllables with which to direct us on our way. We did learn that the normal track was not usable, and so we pretty much made our way cross-country following a barely discernible old track until we came to the paved crossing at Innamincka a day or so later. There was a memorable scene here too, as I waded across in front of the truck at the very end of a glorious day with a bright moon rising and the cold Cooper water shimmering silver.

Nothing but an old pub existed at Innamincka then. It hadn't been found by tourists, and in any case, there weren't thousands of four-wheel-drive travellers around then. We had the place to ourselves. The famous bottle-heap, accumulated during the years when business was brisk, had been mined and most of its contents removed to Adelaide, but you could find a few souvenirs. The old Inland Mission Hospital was a ruin, its gaunt masonry chimney rising above a shapeless pile of rubble and collapsed walls. We called at Nappamerry homestead, just up-

stream and got directions to the dig-tree. Nobody went there either, so we inspected the famous icon feeling as much alone as the explorers must have done in that summer of 1861 when a couple of brave fellows were changed by fate and folly into posthumous heroes.

For a while I used to take an afternoon off every week or so and take my mini-moke down to Possamunga, 50 miles down stream, the home of Rupert Edwards and his family. It was his mother's idea that I should get a good feed at least once a week, and in any case I enjoyed Rupert's company. Mrs Edwards was the daughter of "Nana Watts", a lady who was a kind of matriarch not just in her family, but of the whole Bulloo region. She had been born at Bulloo Downs many years before, the first white child in the far south-west, so they said. Her sons lived on several places along the River, and were very solid folks. I guess I didn't have enough historical sense to appreciate the privilege of contact with such a witness - a real pity. Apparently she was a good story-teller too.

The core pioneering tradition in the Quilpie district though belonged to the Costellos and Duracks and their descendants the Tullys. One day one of the Tully men brought an old aboriginal man to see me and introduced him as "Tiger Ray". *Ray* was one of many holdings split from the original *Thylungra* over the years, quite a few of them still in the family. For some reason I always remember his remark, meant to indicate a generous regard and concern, that this old man, a life-long servant of the family, was "as good as a white man". He went on to say that Tiger had been acquired by the household as a small child when he survived some violent episode in colonial times in which his own people had perished. I had no idea exactly what this implied, but nevertheless I somehow saw a picture of the kid taken up by a horseman, carried back to the women, leaving others to clean up after the shooting. Now I understand the times better, I'm sure something like this must have really happened. That's an interesting thing about living in a settler land: the episodes of the past are all squeezed up together, so one or two life-times can span the whole tale - including the bits we'd like to forget. Where were all the other aborigines from the Bulloo? I never thought to ask at the time, but now it's clear the survivors must have been removed at some time to missions in the East.

It might have been conversations with Charlie Phillott, or perhaps it was the contradictory stories I heard, but after a while I began to wonder about the effect of introducing all those vast flocks of sheep on the country and its vegetation. One bloke would say the routine practice of pushing over all the mulga in a paddock was good for the country - it stimulated Mitchell grass and the trees eventually always grew back. Others would say that mulga could be permanently eliminated this way, leaving the soil vulnerable to erosion by the wind. But it looked as if nobody knew. And there seemed to be a strong imperative to approve

the farming methods of fathers and grandfathers. But then, it seemed, only two or three generations before, the ancestors must have been making it up, since they were the first ones on the spot. Now, it's perfectly plain that sheep have made an enormous difference to the plants, and the soil and hydrology, and the fauna. You can see eroded profiles everywhere. It is not at all clear that this kind of use of these rangelands can continue indefinitely, or even for many years - it probably depends on how much or little it rains, and how many long dry intervals there are in future.



I don't remember exactly the day nurse Phillott appeared in the hospital, but I do remember the odd fateful feeling that accompanied my meeting with this interesting person whose path to my acquaintance seemed to have been paved by fortune and good auspices. Over the next few months we fell in love. Late in 1971 we took a ride with Bob Holley in his plane to look at the River in flood, and in the new year I left Quilpie for a job at Beaudesert, and in February we were married in the Collins family chapel at Mundoolun. And I felt pretty sure old uncle Charlie in Tasmania would have approved.

By then I had three years of service left under the terms of my

scholarship, and I thought I should get closer to a clinical scene where I could learn from colleagues. So I started married life as medical superintendent of the small hospital at Beaudesert. The job had belonged before to a GP who did it part time, so it wasn't too demanding (although I had to be around 24 hours a day), and I set up a dark-room in a spare room at the hospital and spent many hours in there when nothing else was happening. Under slightly different circumstances, we might have stayed there for good. One of the GPs wanted me to abandon my bonded service and join him in practice, and it's a pretty nice district, close to the mountains. A couple of times we almost bought a bit of land there. But it didn't turn out that way.

In September Alwyn was born at the Mater hospital. Her first home was the little house in Tina St Beaudesert. That's where she became a new citizen of Earth, and where we got our first practice at being parents. Being in love is easy. Getting to be a parent is too. But being a decent life-long partner and a really good parent are both things you either just know, or else have to figure out somehow. Trouble is, mediocre models for these roles are all around, and inside us too; and in any case, our constitutions incline us toward patterns that are familiar. And so we spend years (unless we are lucky) discovering and mending errors before the malleable stuff inside us is reformed into something like a really grown-up human being. So it was with us. It has always seemed a marvel (at least since I understood the issue) that kids can spend their early life in the care of incompetent parents and yet emerge like butterflies miraculously whole and ready for flight. However they manage it, this must be the most wonderful thing about making a family - that the cost of regret can be so small, and the rewards so much greater than you have any right to expect.



During that year at Beaudesert I met Andrew Drynan, a man from an old family with large land holdings in the Christmas Creek region near the State border and next to the western flanks of Lamington National park. It's a beautiful place, and he very kindly offered us the use of an empty old house he had at Chinghee, overlooking Running Creek. For the next couple of years we spent many weekends and holidays there. The creek ran beneath a tall ridge with the border of New South Wales along its summit. In deep pools, if you were careful you could observe platypus in the early morning or at dusk, and as little Alwyn lay in her basket, or later played in the grass or the shallow water, pheasant coucals called again and again from their secret places in the scrub. I remember hearing Gough

Whitlam's victory speech in December 1972 on the little radio as the wood stove cooked our evening meal in that homely kitchen by the purling stream, with its ever-so-faint smell of rat droppings.

We got to know the good folks at Tamborine House, the grand homestead on a low ridge within sight of Mundoolun. Here we installed Rhonda's old favourite mare, Freckles, after she arrived on the train all the way from Winton. And here we had many nice rides - at least Rhonda did - my only accomplishment was to stay on the back of my horse, in a wobbly sort of way - and to be fair I should give most credit for that to the horse. I never got any further with this in spite of many future opportunities. I felt exactly as insecure at the end of my riding career as I did at the beginning. Just the same, I could easily see what a pleasure it was to poke around the country mounted on a steed, and even sometimes to canter with the wind in your hair and the ground streaming past, and the drumming hooves beneath you.

At the beginning of 1973 we moved to a house in the grounds of the Redcliffe hospital, where, for the next year I was a kind of 'registrar of everything'. My boss the medical superintendent, a rather reticent fellow, was a species of practitioner now extinct - the self-trained surgeon. He was the only other senior full-time clinician, so between us we did all the supervision of the juniors as well as all the after-hours work. I was in a position to gain experience in all the clinical disciplines that year, and by and by to choose one of them for my future career - at least that was the idea. In the end I decided to take a job in internal medicine for the final scholarship year. There was an informal understanding that if you wanted to enter the specialist training program after that, the Director-General would fix things with the College and so guarantee you a place in their schedule - a kind of reward for those years in the bush. The job was at Ipswich, where I'd begun six years before.

Towards the end of the year, we bought a house on the side of the hill in Emerald St, Brassall, and in the new year we moved there. It was a type of modest house very common in the city: built about 70 years before of hoop pine, with four or five rooms, a little kitchen and a verandah on two sides. It was high enough above the ground on sturdy ironbark stumps to put a car beneath, and from the back you could look out to see the dark outline of Flinders Peak, the grand eminence of the West Moreton region, and a place we would get to know later on. Breezes from that way cooled the place in summer, as its original owners would have known very well. At the top of the hill, the suburb gave way to bush; down on the flat land where Ironpot Creek meandered toward the Bremer River, a mile or so away, green paddocks kept the buildings apart, and a few cows grazed between the houses.

Brassall was a spacious place in 1974. I had no idea then that in a few years I would commit myself to 30 years of work in a building on one of those spaces - but that's the way it turned out. Being at the edge of town, semi-rural and closest to the nearby districts of Pine Mountain, Haigslea, Marburg, Fernvale, a lot of old farmers had moved there when their sons and daughters took over the farm, and quite a lot of those sons lived there too if they had jobs in the railway workshops or plywood factory or the meat works or woollen mill or the Council. One of Ipswich's two state high schools stood next to the creek, and over the road was Brassall State School, where, in due course, Alwyn, Lloyd and Helen would spend their primary school years.

It was a very rainy summer, specially the January we moved from Redcliffe. (If you want an accurate picture, just refer to *The House at Pooh Corner* - "... it rained and and it rained and it rained ...") The bloke at Biloela who's house I used for parties a year or two before, Malcolm Allen, was in Ipswich as O&G registrar. Clyde-Rowan, their little boy was almost exactly Alwyn's age. We had a feed at their hospital flat the evening before Australia Day, and then coming home fairly late, we drove down the hill past the school and almost ran into the little creek, which in those few hours had turned into a torrent. Eventually we found a way round it, but in the morning the sight from our veranda was a strange one. All you could see of the high school was its roof. Boody's store where the kids went to get stuff after school had disappeared under a vast lake of brown water. This was the worst flood in the Brisbane and Bremer valleys since the two cities had grown big, and it did a lot of damage. A few years later they decided to build Wivenhoe Dam to make sure it never happened again.

At that time the hospital employed one 'social worker'. It wasn't a profession with much clout then. Hospital people didn't think the welfare of patients outside the institution was much of their concern, so Therese, who held the position had a hard time getting things done. Nonetheless she doggedly accompanied medical ward-rounds, making suggestions and getting lumbered with all sorts of jobs the nurses thought beneath them. She and her husband lived at the time in the big house of Stuart Patterson, a GP of the old school who's family had been so long in Ipswich that they were very well known to my mother. One day, we visited them there and that's how we got acquainted with Albert who has been a good friend ever since.

Albert and Therese were born in Holland just about the same time I was. She belonged to a family of farmers near the town of Middlebeers; Albert was the son of an artist. Somehow, before he was very old, he became an orphan, and somehow, he was raised by Therese's family. After school he went to Montreal to

study agricultural science, and somehow drifted into the school of fine arts and learned pottery instead. When I met him, he had built a kiln in the garden of one of Ipswich's really nice old houses, *Garrowie*, in Whitehill Rd, originally built by one of the city's successful merchants. Then it belonged to a bloke I had known at school who was a GP. His wife was a promoter of the arts scene in town, and gave Albert a shed to work in and a gallery upstairs. Once or twice a year they held an exhibition of work there and collected some reward for all the effort.

I learned many things from this friendship, but for some reason if I try to remember them, the first one I think of is this: his pottery teacher in Montreal never allowed him to keep anything he'd turned until he'd made something like 1,000 pots and screwed them up. His idea was that if you were to learn the craft you had to figure out how to make things and how to appraise them - and you had to be just as good at one as the other. So each pot had to be examined for its virtues and failings, cut in half, weighed in the hand, regarded from every angle, before being re-cycled. You couldn't learn about finishing, according to this master, before you knew how to tell a good pot from a fluke. In this way, Albert showed me how every artist must first generate an idea of what he wants to do, then know how to make it happen, then know how successful he has been. Otherwise, the productions of art are mere accidents, easily affected by vanity, greed, fashion, whim and delusion. His own craft had plenty of practitioners badly confused by this, and he knew it well. He was and still is the most incorruptible artist I've ever known.

I guess I understood then (I've certainly come to appreciate it since) that Albert's example was something very valuable. It wasn't just a lesson about how an artist ought to behave, or how works of art are produced, but also how we all should stand in respect of the temptations and blandishments of the good life we've been given. In writing this memoir I'm very much aware that my life-time happened to coincide with the most extraordinary explosion of wealth and comfort (at least for some of the world's citizens) that has ever occurred - and that this bonanza can't last for ever and must wind down sooner or later and can never happen again. It should be clear to us, the beneficiaries of these riches, that we are responsible for the profligacy of our time and for managing the consequences on behalf of our descendants, but it is not; and we are not. As affluence has grown, so has discontent. We are acquisitive when we should be grateful; helpless when we need to be inventive; indulgent and torpid in the face of grave responsibilities. My friend's integrity, in some way that is a bit hard to explain, has always seemed like the correct antidote to this state of affairs.

Lloyd was born in the winter of that year of the flood, on a bright morning as Alwyn and I waited in the car park of the Mater hospital. He had lived a few weeks

in his first home on Emerald Hill by the time we bestowed his two Welsh names - one for the grey wizard, and one for his ancestors and the old Celtic saint. By the end of the year, with freedom looming, whether from sloth, or want of ambition, or the discouraging example of my over-worked physician supervisors, I had decided not to prepare for the physicians primary exam, but to see the world instead. I guess some idea of encountering the old world had been suppressed a long time. Anyway, we began to think of the future as a long and winding road with no landmarks except fabled destinations on the far side of the planet. But before that could happen something else turned up.

In December we got news that Rhonda's mother had climbed up the homestead windmill, looking for the smoke of a rumoured bushfire, and fallen, breaking her leg. Whenever, in years to come this tale was mentioned, Olive would stoutly deny that she had ever climbed the windmill or been so careless - so there's a certain amount of doubt about the cause - nevertheless, accident there was, and we offered to go to Goolma to mind the place while Rex was in Townsville with his wife. So in the new year after a bit of a holiday at Straddie, we set off for the West. It was March before we left Winton, and in the meantime I learned a few things about sheep, and discovered that looking after them isn't quite as simple as it looks. I certainly left evidence of my mismanagement behind, for which my good host never reprimanded me, and I took away a new regard for the people who tend great flocks for a living in lean times and fair - but no envy for their vocation.

While there for those months it occurred to me to fulfil a wish first felt in boyhood - of owning a rifle. When I was a kid you could just buy an airgun at the sports shop, but although I wanted one badly, and offered to deliver papers to earn the money, Dad never thought it was a good idea. My deprivation then became the burden of a boy down the hill who had a Diana air rifle - I could never get enough of plinking targets, sparrows and whatever else showed up. If there's a case to be made for boys "getting this out of their systems" before they're too old, my delayed career as a hunter might be its best illustration. The day I collected my BRNO .22 from Searles in Winton began a period of reckless enthusiasm that lasted years, and in due course infected Albert, with equally exasperating effects on his patient spouse and family.

To fund our journey I'd arranged locum work in South Australia at Loxton on the Murray, and that was where I first got amongst the rabbits. Before long I was going out before dawn hunting them, bringing home meat for rabbit stew, and tanning skins for rugs. When we came home to Brassall toward the end of the year I found, by carefully stalking the bush on the far side of Emerald Hill I could bag a hare now and then, or once in a while, a sly fox. All these were put to use, but at

the sacrifice of a lot of my spare time and the attention of my young family. Old Les Castles the fruit man who brought fresh produce in a truck each week, when he learned of my obsession, revealed one of his own; so we set off together one weekend to find his old mate in Warwick and a great new field for our hunting ambitions. We duly found what we were looking for at a place called Dunblane, off the road between Warwick and Inglewood - the proprietor generously granted an open permit to reduce his rabbits, and over several years we obliged with alacrity.

Having said what I needed to about the irresponsibility of my hunting craze, let me just say a little something in its defence. It really is an atavistic and strangely satisfying thing to do. Success requires a state of exaggerated alertness I never felt at any other time. In fact the only time I ever thought I'd seen its equivalent was when I watched aborigines in the desert looking for small game. I'm not sure where the skills of stalking and dispatching the quarry cleanly in the humane manner came from - it was almost as if they were there all the time, only needing to be unveiled. That's the way it felt - as if one were performing human functions so well fitted to our capacities (even though dormant) and so apt for our needs that it began to seem odd the way so much distance had been put between us and the procurement of our daily bread. We have forgotten, it seems, the necessity that ruled us during the long ages before the first farmers - and yet packed away in our subconscious somewhere all the equipment we need is still there.

Lloyd learned to walk in the big old house of the GP in Yea, in Victoria, and tottered about the garden at Loxton overlooking the River. In September we drove the Birdsville Track to get home. I worked for some guys in Ipswich until April, then we put our stuff in bags and boarded a plane to London. We had no plans except to stay until we'd had enough or the money ran out. I always remember an impression that came to me as we drove in to the City, a bit awe-struck: "so that's how they fit in all those people - by putting them in layers". This townscape so normal in Europe was to become entirely familiar in the next year or so as we drifted from one place to the next, for some time in no hurry for it to come to an end.

Alwyn had her fourth birthday in France at Tours; Lloyd had his second in Scotland. They ran shouting down the great nave of the cathedral at Gloucester because it sounded so good, and were duly admonished by a prelate in black robes - confirming our belief that the English preferred dogs to children. They ate long loaves of bread at Amiens after we inspected the cathedral there. They scabbled among the old stones of Pompeii looking for lizards. They discovered a delicious breakfast cereal they called "Roladuds" in Venice -unobtainable ever since. From a hitch-hiker they learned to read their story in French. They climbed to the summit

of Vesuvius and looked down into the fuming vent where the Earth reveals a tiny bit of the restless cauldron seething beneath her familiar, habitable crust . They rode on my back up the snowy slopes of the Cairngorms, and played before the Duomo in the City of Michelangelo.



What it gained these waifs to roam thus I'm not sure. If you take a romantic view of travel you could say, since every experience leaves a permanent impression, traveling kids must acquire a stock of exotic (and maybe virtuous) memories, somewhere between subliminal and conscious - the soaring cathedral vault, the texture of vine-covered walls, the taste of cheese from the market, the tinkle of a shepherd's bell, the smell of kelp on the Atlantic shore. Well, If these had any value for my kids it wasn't obvious. Besides, I'm not too confident affirming the rewards their parents claimed after that wandering year either. One thing became

clear to me later though: if we understand by "culture" the collection of implicit knowledge we acquire by belonging to a particular community, then it is in the nature of things that this is almost always invisible to us. Culture rules us, not by consent, but by necessity.

On the other hand, alien cultures are all too visible, especially in those respects where they most differ from us; and it turns out that by far the most reliable way to make one's own culture visible is to confront another. Reflection upon this experience has always been the most fruitful way to generate cultural insight. That is surely what people have in mind when they say, "Travel broadens the mind". It does that by moving the ground beneath our feet and shifting our perspective just enough to show that we have one. But that's not all. I remember specially certain sensory thrills that I understood then, and still believe to be the effect of encounters with great works of imagination - products of a world remote in time, but eloquent in the unchanging language of beauty.

I think of the choir at Lincoln cathedral; the sight of Chenonceau across the water; wandering around the Parthenon; cycling in the Tuscan hills; gazing again and again at the things that Donatello made; the facades of Venice reflected in the canal, and the basilica, that boastful, gorgeous, ethereal and enigmatic monument, so marvellous you can never decide whether it celebrates sublimity or folly - here, at any rate they seem to be inseparable. I remember in the Peloponnese, coming upon the sparse ruins of the temple at Bassae, in the mist after a climb; and sitting in the shade of beautiful plane trees sipping brandy in some village of the Dordogne. San Vitale in Ravenna with its glittering magic vaults; following Berenson to the Masaccio frescoes in Ogni Santi across the Arno after a delightful walk.

There's no doubt these and many more things are stored, slowly decaying in the banks of memory like antiques in a museum basement, where the creaky door hardly ever opens to admit some feeble light. Do they matter? If I worked hard and expanded the list by ten times would they matter more? Well, yes and no. Travel was never about boasting - yet that has been one of its prominent uses for as far back as we know. It was always about learning, as we can still discover from the very first travel writer (and one of the greatest) Herodotus. If you think curiosity is one of the best bits of human nature, then taking to the road, observing and reflection must be one of its best employments. And yet ... it depends on the details. If you collect novelties to stick into albums or line up on shelves like souvenirs, that is one thing; if they pass through understanding, like the things dug up by archaeologists, that is another.

It's not so much that we travel as scientists (of course we don't) but we do carry with us on every journey the bag full of our processed experience - what we think we know: judgements, prejudices, quotes, images, formulas, points of view - all of it incomplete (or at least capable of enrichment). If our minds are open and our curiosity active, new stuff goes into this bag. The essence of travel is a steady rain of novelties falling into the open bag, day by day, hour after hour, filling it up, yet never full. What happens to them in there? Well, that depends on whether there's a librarian on duty. Unsorted stuff gets jostled around and works its way to the bottom; but if some agency is at work with a catalogue, surprising connections can be found. Old folders you thought were closed can be expanded and renewed. Sometimes their contents change beyond recognition. Travel is after all only a special case of the thing that makes us human - our astonishing power of modifying our behaviour through understanding.

It was a meandering journey. In London we bought one of those vans that you drive like a car, and then when you want, you enter a door in the back and you are home. This was our home for a bit over a year. Starting in southern England, we went to Wales and Anglesea then Ireland. Not long before, the British ambassador had been killed by Irish terrorists, and Londonderry was full of soldiers who warned us not to tarry on that side of the border after dark, for fear of kidnap. We took the advice. We spent much of the summer in Scotland, reaching the Orkney Isles before turning south again. Then the channel ferry carried us to Calais and we began six months of wandering in France, Italy and Greece, and some places in between.

When I was a second-year anatomy student, we had a tutor who had just arrived in the country from Paris. I got to know him well. He was a native of Romania, and I found his refugee's story and his culture fascinating, specially his taste for irony and a nice sense of the absurd. He also showed me how it is that the imagination only produces works of value through a kind of formality, though what this implied for the use of discipline in the conduct of life, I'm not sure if either of us was ready to acknowledge back then. And he confirmed my awareness of something important - that the world is wonderful, not because it is full of certainties, nor because it is all mystery, but because its uncertainties can be found and explored and sometimes illuminated.

Before we left on our journey, I had decided to visit his homeland. Romania was still 'behind the Iron Curtain' in 1976, governed (if that is the word for its brutal dictatorship) by the cruel Nicolae Ceausescu and a vast state security apparatus. It was essentially closed to the West, so far as normal trade and commerce and cultural exchange; its people deprived of most decent necessities as well as all civic freedoms; its cultural life suffocated by an absurd quasi-political orthodoxy. All the

same, it struck me as a fascinating destination because of its peripheral status in the European story. All the autocrats, I figured out later, were apparently cast from the same mould - the one that makes bullies. Our visit was a useful step to this discovery. We got visas from the London consulate after a bit of trouble, and in due course, after crossing the Danube plain, presented ourselves at the frontier.

It was guarded by armed soldiers. You might have expected that these men, charged with protecting their country from subversion, would have been little interested in our small expedition - but no. After attentively examining our papers, they demanded to know if we had guns or bibles on board, as if these were the most dangerous covert imports they could imagine. Denial was not enough, so they searched our living quarters diligently and discovered the tapes of Winnie the Pooh the kids listened to as we went along. These aroused suspicion - perhaps Pooh looked like a pop-star - and we had to try to explain that he was a non-political bear with no bad western habits who did not preach the gospel. Once inside, it was pretty soon clear that this was a country with its face turned away, not just from freedom, but enlightenment and grace and truth, and what George Orwell liked to call "common decency".

There seemed to be a sort of grey pall over the whole place. It affected the ugly buildings, and the faces of all its citizens. Everywhere you could read a kind of resignation in those faces, not so much sullen as debilitated, like the physical environment. You felt as if they could use a good dose of sunshine, and then a spring clean followed by a big party. If you went to buy food, the shelves appeared to be mostly empty, just as my friend had described. You either took the very plain stuff that was there, or you bribed a guy to get something else from the back-room. In the town of Deva, at the foothills of the western Carpathian Mountains, we encountered a young student who introduced himself and then found us a camping place on the edge of some woods, and then, in the evening, came to talk. It was an interesting few hours.

Apparently his brief conversation with us in the town had been noted by the police already. That's how it must be in a closed society: conversing with strangers is risky. That's why the North Korean dictator saves himself this particular anxiety by sealing his country even more tightly than Romania in the '70s. I was a bit too naive in those days to understand all he told us, but I can see now what it meant - all oppression is basically the same. Someone wants as much as he can get; which means taking it from everyone else; which means exerting power over as many as he can; which means inventing some source of control and exercising it with as much force as necessary for as long as it takes. Sound familiar? It should. This is the definition of a bully. Every tyrant without exception, when and if they are deposed, turns out to be a whimp disguised as a giant, frequently with appalling

tastes and habits, talking lies and moved in every one of his actions by nothing more complex than greed.

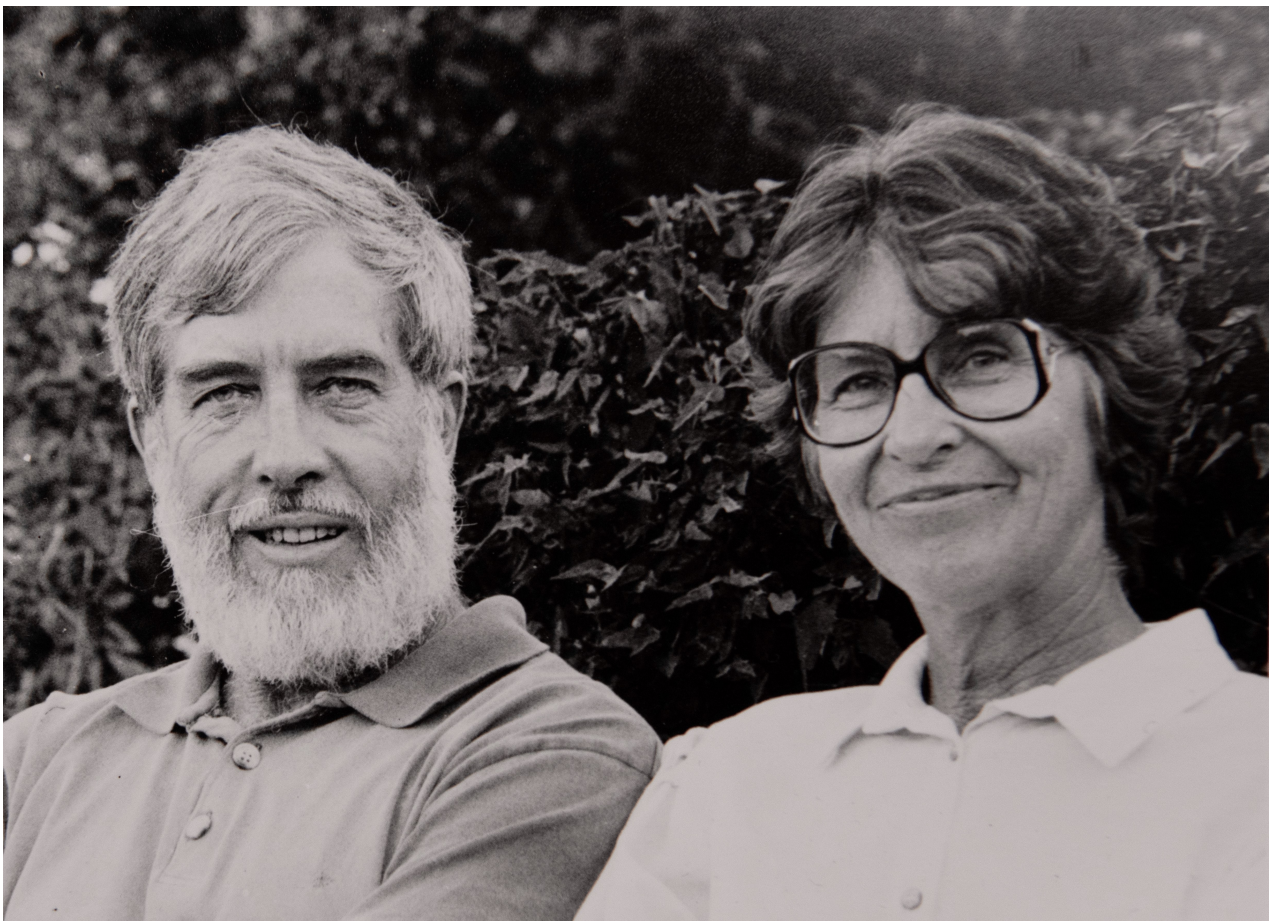
By the time we'd been there a week, we felt the oppression too and turned towards the border. This meant traversing another communist country on our way to Greece, but one with a quite different atmosphere. Yugoslavia, as it was then, was a federation of Balkan States held together by the force of the Serbian strongman Tito. Although he was a Soviet client, he had a somewhat independent streak - at any rate the effect of his rule was a degree of openness unlike poor Romania. It would be another 13 years before Ceausescu felt the fury of his subjects - it was the last thing he ever felt. At the beginning of November we entered Greece following the River Vardar down from the Macedonian Mountains. The border policeman played with the kids and gave Lloyd his whistle to keep.

We stayed in Greece for a couple of months and had Christmas in Thessaloniki in the snow. From there we climbed the mountains of Montenegro, in mid-winter all covered in snow and ice and hostile to our camping practice and sub-tropical tastes. In a day or two we looked down onto the warm Adriatic coast and made our way from there to Venice. About that time, we got a message from Rod that he and Celia were on their way to Europe, and so we arranged to meet in Florence. When we arrived in the Queen city of great renown, we decided to stay at a spacious camp-ground in the lovely old town of Fiesole in the hills just outside the City. At that time of year it was pretty quiet, so we quit our van and hired a little cabin under the pines. We spent the next month or so there, poking about the district, walking the crooked walled lanes of the village, and taking the bus down to Florence to inspect its treasures.

Rod and Ceil turned up sometime in January. Almost the first thing Rod announced was that the VW kombie he'd bought in London needed its engine fixed, so in bitter wind and cold rain, we fiddled with nuts and bolts and gaskets and valves until it was OK. By and by we left Fiesole together to see Pisa, then followed the Apennines to Rome. Rod and I stood with the immense crowd filling the square before St Peter's basilica to hear the Pope deliver his Easter message for 1976. We took it in turns to visit the Sistine Chapel and tip back our heads in wonder. Then we went to Pompeii and Naples. After that our journey had reached its terminus and we turned about, thinking more and more of home, while Rod and Ceil continued to further adventures in Crete and beyond.

Along the way I got in touch with folks in Ipswich and arranged a job for when we returned, and so in June we dumped our bags on the veranda at Emerald St, emptied them for the last time, and looked once again on the place we would call home from that time forward. It might have turned out differently though. I had a

wish to see the country again, and before the end of the year we made the journey to Winton. Then I approached a couple of country practices in Chinchilla and St George about working there - but by the time something came of this, fate had bound us to a different place. Albert was looking for somewhere to settle down, and one day he called to tell me about a block he'd looked at near Pine Mountain, in case I was interested. I saw it next day and signed the day after as soon as Rhonda had seen it. Within a year we had a home there, and as I write, we still do, 35 years later. This was surely what my old great-uncle had meant when he briefed me all those years before - you choose the path you walk, but you'd better do it with the heart engaged.



Years later, when I read Patrick White's first Australian novel, *The Tree of Man*, I recognized something about this time when we were making a home in the bush. It's not White's first book with an Australian subject, but the first one written after he returned to live near Sydney after the war. It's about a lot of things. One of them is the idea that the universal human experience of creating a home is in some strange way like that other one of figuring out why we are all here.

It seems to me that, right up until our own times, it was unusual for anyone to think and feel as if a human being is utterly alone and aware in the universe with the burden of their own existence. Instead, we always had protections - cocoon-like structures provided by our social arrangements and the stories we told ourselves. But then the time came when we felt bold enough to see what it would be like without them. Perhaps this is a naive account of cultural history, but that's the way it looks. Protagoras of democratic Athens seems to have been such a man - the first we know of. The creator of Lear and Hamlet was certainly another. Now though, this mode of self-consciousness is natural, as if it had been democratized, and we appear to accept the attendant risks of despair and ennui, in order to have the liberation of looking wherever we wish for signs of meaning and value.

White tells the story of an ordinary bloke who discovers this predicament for himself, and as you read about him, you see that we are all in the same spot. Somehow, unless we can find again the old reassurances, we have to either turn away, or look into the abyss. How this vertiginous experience produces all the things it does - confusion and fear, wonder, humility, naked gratitude, and a boundless field for our curiosity - makes the book memorable and great. It's the story of every home-maker.

A home is a lot of things. It locates you. It keeps you safe from unruly stuff outside. It houses your eating and sleeping and everything else you do with the people inside. By and by it gets to resemble you in its shapes and proclivities, because bit by bit you make it the way you like things to be. It gets full of memories and the tokens of your past deeds and joys. It always feels good to come back to it when you've been away. And somehow, the more real your home, the more it speaks to you about mortality - both the brevity of life and the wonders and gifts that are yours while it lasts.

Our paddock had been sold by Stan Russell of Pine Mountain to Peter Kurts the developer six or seven years before. It stood at the end of the street Kurts made through another block he cut up and sold in 1972. With no prospect of doing the same to Stan's old block, he sold it to us. The old Pine Mountain railway station was down near the back gate. A rail-motor travelled between Ipswich and Toogoolawah morning and evening, taking a few folks to work and school. You could hail the driver by standing on the little platform if you had need of it.

Stan had used it to graze a few cows - but it really wasn't much good for that. Before him, it had been logged. Trees for many miles around Ipswich had been plundered for a hundred years to get the timbers used to shore up the coal mines, so some of our trees had probably gone down there. For all I know, some might still be there. Stan at one time had a small saw-mill at the bottom of the paddock

near the rail line. There was an old split-rail fence still standing in places, a sort of mute memorial to the prodigious hard work of old farmers. Two little creeks ran through the block. On one of them, we found a small rock-hole - a secluded, thoughtful place where you could sit and watch birds come to drink. For years afterwards, whenever you went there, a water-dragon would jump into the brown water just before you could get close enough to see him.

Being of modest means then, when it came time to choose a house, we found one you could put together yourself. It cost about the same as what we got by selling the place in Emerald Street, and it came to the site one day in a bunch of big long boxes. All we had to do was open them up and put it together. That happened during the winter of 1978. My father had always been a bloke who made stuff and fixed things, and he taught me a bit. But still, I knew nothing at all about making a house. I soon learned. With help from our friends and relations, and a few books of instruction and the patient man at North State Engineering, the makers of the kit, we had it standing up and weather proof by September.

Looking back, its a bit hard to believe we had all that energy. Morning 'til night each weekend; hours before and after work. We seemed indefatigable. We moved in while it was still unfinished and possums could wander in at night to look for apples and bread. We had no electricity, so we used kerosene lamps just like camping. Water was collected from the roof and pumped from a dam just down the hill. After a while Les Castles brought us some chooks. By and by we had geese, a couple of cows, horses, a sow with a dozen piglets, a dog and a cat or two.

At this time I was working for a practice in Ipswich. One day, coming home, I noticed a sign announcing the imminent building of a shopping centre in Hunter Street Brassall, across from the park. I went over and spoke to the blokes working there, one of whom turned out to be the owner. On the spot I claimed a tenancy to open a surgery, and in due course, in September 1979, we opened the doors of Brassall Clinic for the first time. Helen was two weeks old. Sometime in the next year, as things got busier, Rhonda came to work at the desk with Helen in a basket or crawling around the waiting room exploring the patients' feet. Sometimes she would make it outside as far as the fruit shop for the reward of grapes and a bit of a fuss.

Those were the days when you made a practice grow by always being there - day and night, seven days a week. It's not good for family life, and in the end, not good for the GP either. You either get dependent on being needed, or you get to resent the intrusion - often a bit of both. It so happened that the shop next to ours was rented by an Ipswich dental practice, and it wasn't long before we discovered a friendship with one of the dentists and his family. The Steeles too had returned

from a sojourn in Europe in the previous year and finding ourselves in about the same place on the trajectory of life, we began sharing many good times. It was John who pointed out to me after a year or two that your practice would not disintegrate if you took a few weeks off, and in fact, you risked your own disintegration if you did not. This was very sound advice, which only took one trial to confirm.

After a few years, I was joined by an associate, and in a few more years, we got together with the dentists and built our own place across the street; and the practice eventually grew to fill that building - a diversified group practice with some admirable qualities. And Brassall was the scene of my working life for more than thirty years. It's a little odd thinking of all that time seated in the same chair, doing many of the same things, and conversing with many of the same people. Our existence is not to be repeated, so spending a large fraction of it this way demands some account of its meaning.

At the beginning I remember noticing something I'd found at Quilpie - a sort of tacit understanding between the community of patients and the doctor. Later, I realized what this was. Insofar as anthropology has been able to discover anything about cultural origins, Medicine Men appear to be the first vocational group appointed by human societies. There seem to be very strong reasons for this - reasons that have to do with the experience of illness and its effect on self-awareness and identity. As far as we know, every traditional society held a system of beliefs about the causes of illness, misfortune and death, and required some kind of intermediary to manage these phenomena. So the association of medicine with magic is as old as the profession; and the era of scientific medicine has not expunged it.

Society grants exclusive privileges to its healers, expecting services in return. Traditional respect for doctors is partly due to their esoteric knowledge, partly to the power they mediate over existential matters, partly to professional solidarity, but most of all it is the residue of that ancient bargain under which they are admitted to a realm where stories of sickness are converted into the formulae that rationalize healing. Only doctors are expected to perform this feat - translating those anxious intimate narratives into that quintessential clinical thing, a diagnosis. Naming the illness. It's a powerful thing to do. It may be the most potent of all medical functions - more therapeutic sometimes than prescribing a remedy.

In the process of his work, the doctor hears many stories - often fraught, and surprisingly often highly dramatic, in the sense that they condense and illuminate passages of lives as if they were structured, even symmetrical. Such stories produce a strong feeling of the meaningfulness of life, the same way a good plot

does. Sometimes a patient reveals themselves to be a natural story-teller, composing, pacing, building their story with an innately satisfying yet naive perfection. Sometimes a story opens some reality you had never imagined. And very often you are admitted as witness or participant to episodes that are normally closed, full of intensity and significance for the protagonists. Whenever I thought about the rewards of practice, it was always this experience of the privileged witness that came first to mind.

All this is enriching and in a way, rewarding. There is of course an imperative of secrecy over these interactions, and if I ever had the impulse to become a sort of retailer of memorable tales the way a few doctors have managed to do, that (and sheer indolence) is what prevented me. Still, I sometimes regret that I never kept any journal to record some of my responses to this endless stream of novelty - the moving exhibition of human capacity, failing and salvation that passed through those unremarkable doors and into my small consulting room.

I guess I'd had a suppressed wish to be competent in the humanities ever since I'd known undergraduate restlessness in the mid-1960s. So around 1985 I enrolled in a BA degree course at my old university, starting with an introductory unit in - you guessed it - philosophy. At that time UQ had the biggest department of external studies in the country, and it was well resourced. The idea was to use my weekly free afternoon to go to the library, read or write. Course materials arrived in the mail. You had to attend an in-house week toward the end of each semester. I did this for a couple of years, then quit, I suppose because I got a bit busy. Then a few years later I re-started the degree at UNE - UQ had by then closed its department.

I think I learned a lot doing this, although at the time I wasn't sure what it was. Towards the end of 1996 at the suggestion of a colleague, I applied for a job in the Centre for General Practice at my old medical school. I took a liking to my new boss, as soon as we met. He was an Englishman with a Cambridge degree, ambitious, as you had to be in the academic jungle, but open, humorous and affable, while keeping his cultivated manners and tastes slightly visible. Even a hint of this can be interpreted in our country as reserve, or worse - colonial disdain - as he well knew. I was given the job of developing a course for GPs designed to help them understand the nature of the discipline of general practice. Someone else had begun this task, leaving a lot undone, so I had a pretty free hand.

The only trouble was I knew nothing about the subject. And nothing about how academics do things; I'd never even sent an email. So I had to learn fast. For the rest of the year I took a day off and spent it there. The following year I gave it two

days. Bit by bit the course came together, and during 1997 I taught my first group of colleagues, learning as I went. And about then I began to understand that philosophy is a useful thing to know. Once I looked, I found philosophical puzzles embedded in general practice everywhere. I discovered that a few others had found them too - there was in fact a mini-discipline called the “philosophy of medicine”, not very well developed, and mostly practiced by amateurs like myself, but very stimulating and (I came to think) essential to the proper conduct of debates about the place of modern medicine in the life of society.

Most of my GP students were less entranced than that. Just the same I enjoyed finding ways of illuminating the intellectual foundations of clinical thinking and procedures, so they could usefully reflect on what it is we all do. At just that time, the University had embarked on something remarkably radical (for a university) - replacing its six-year medical degree course, modelled on the century-old British pattern, with a four-year one offered not to school-leavers, but to graduates, based on a much more American teaching model. Instead of beginning with frogs and cats and the dissecting room, and waiting nearly four years to meet their first patient, students plunged immediately into a carefully structured series of clinical problems, and began learning the skills of gathering clinical data by practice. I added some teaching in the new course to my other work, and got to know a fascinating new kind of student.

They were a bit older, and many of them had experience in previous careers - some related to the clinic, but many not. Some had unleashed a long-repressed desire to enter medicine; some were extremely well prepared. Many of them brought interesting new perspectives to bear on the work of the clinic. As a group they were very stimulating and rewarding. You got close to them because the whole idea of the new course was to direct self-learning, rather than impart knowledge from a hoard of established truths (or prejudices), and to do this mainly through small group tutorials, themselves largely self-directed. This made a lot of sense to me. Just the same, going through with such a big reform in a very conservative place like a medical school isn't easy, and I could see that chronic tensions inside the faculty about every aspect of the new course were making things harder still.

Several faculty members were just as interested in the “theory” behind the course as I was, and many enlightening discussions ensued. One of the new things in the course was a much bigger emphasis on learning from practice in the community, rather than the wards of the big tertiary hospitals. It had been recognized for ages that these institutions had become so highly specialized that the spectrum of illness visible to students in them was nothing like what they would encounter when they were presented with those freshly minted stories of sickness across

their desks a few years later. In fact, the filters used to sort patients for the big hospitals were exactly designed for the training of senior clinicians, not undergraduates. This was the first time anything had been done about the problem.

Students in the third year were to spend a whole clinical semester in general practice, and another one in the country. Entire new arrangements would be needed for this teaching by the time the first cohort reached third year. With my country experience in mind, I was given the job of developing a teaching network and a clinical education base in Central Queensland. The already established clinical school in Townsville would take care of the North, and one of my GP students was appointed to look after another centre in Toowoomba. As well, the carefully composed hypothetical “problems” that were used for tutorial work throughout the course were to incorporate a lot of themes from community medicine - primary care presentations and management, the role of the adjunctive disciplines of occupational therapy, physiotherapy, psychotherapy, care of chronic illnesses, and so on.

All this gave our small unit plenty to do. Once the third year teaching began, I spent most of my time at this job, and only consulted at Brassall when there was a chance. I spent quite a bit of time in Rockhampton, where the new Central Clinical School was based, and some more on the road visiting and organizing with my rural GP colleagues. One of the many things I learned in those years is this: all problems in which human motives and interests are closely involved can never be solved once and for all. They should be seen as fields for compromise, never fields of battle; and solutions should always be up for revision should the need arise. I also figured out how to tell if you have more stake in some issue than you thought, by the way it affects your feelings.

About this time, I got a call from the Head of our department. He offered me the chance to work on a project he had started at Thursday Island. It was a sort of pet thing, I suppose. He had known Phillip Mills, the Torres Strait man who ran the health service there, for some years. Apparently they got along rather well - he spoke with evident relish of balmy tropical evenings spent on Phillip’s veranda - and at some time together (maybe on that veranda with beers in hand) they had concocted the idea of establishing a tertiary education centre on the island to support its educational needs and eventually its economic and social development. It’s a very remote region; island folks always had a hard time going away to be educated, and the results weren’t very good. They wanted more capacity on the spot. There were various ways this could be done. The project was to sort out which to propose to the Commonwealth.

I had been there not long before with a group from the distance education centre to talk to locals about our courses. I'd been enchanted. It's a wonderfully beautiful place with a romantic atmosphere that reminds you of tropical stories from a century ago. The people seemed exotic and alluring, as well as generous; the township was just run-down enough to be charming, with just enough hints of its storied past to provoke your curiosity. Rather selfishly, I accepted his offer without consulting anyone. Understandably, my boss wasn't thrilled - but I think in my shoes he would have done the same. Some time later, after some preparation I went to the Torres Strait for six weeks to pull the proposal together and write up its design and justification.

Again, I was out of my depth. With hindsight, I can see that this was easily spotted by many of the people I worked with, but since it didn't seem to bother the bloke who'd appointed me, they kindly didn't say so. I knew nothing at all about indigenous problems - only what everyone knew: that they seemed to be intractable and in places, severe. I didn't have a clue about the large amount of work that had been done on these problems, nor what was going on in the present, nor the multiple complex lines of argument and debate that arose around them, nor the dense political contests and confusion in which these realities were reformulated over and over. I didn't know any of the personnel in the many sectors of public administration, universities and research and policy institutes that had a stake in the problems, nor the way massive quantities of public funds were spread around and used to employ large numbers of operatives in many vocations.

Looking back, I'm still not sure this project had any chance of success. Several people during my consultations were frank enough to express what should have been an obvious truth - that putting this infrastructure on a tiny island in a small archipelago with maybe 10,000 people, very limited employment opportunity and an undeveloped local economy was generous to say the least, and probably foolhardy. Anyway, once my part was done and it became a political matter, it failed to get the needed support. Over the next few years, backing for higher education in the Strait was actually reduced, and my work vanished into that big black hole full of futile enthusiasms and nicely bound reports.

But it wasn't wasted on me. If I'd ever thought about the problem of the indigenous people before, I'd been too ill-informed to have a useful opinion. After that, I began to see it as both a practical and a moral problem. I came across the work of historian Henry Reynolds about that time, and became convinced it was the premier moral problem for Australian society. Reynolds through his several books written for the public, probably did more than anyone to raise the profile of the issue of historical injustice. Once you'd digested this news of colonial conquest though, there remained the persistent puzzle: why was the problem of

integrating surviving aborigines (and islanders) so hard to solve? This uneasy thought stayed with me for the next few years.

Now, thank goodness, I can regard the episode I'm about to relate with a bit more clarity than I could at the time, when Rhonda and I struggled with powerful motives and a lot of confusion. Just as the Christian calendar was closing down on its second millennium, we felt as though our marriage might be more trouble than it was worth, and eventually decided to go separate ways for a while, each following a private ambition on opposite sides of the world. We'd plugged away at books of good advice, sought the guidance of professionals, and conferred endlessly, but something about marriage seemed insoluble. We didn't really have a clue what it was. She arranged a job in London, and I got one at a tiny outpost in Central Australia. After a year like this we reunited, reconciled in some way, but it still took another year or two to figure out enough to replace a bunch of bad habits with some better ones.

My new job began as an intermittent one - two months there; two months back at UQ - but by the end of the year, it became full-time and I quit teaching for good. Not without some regret. I ended up spending a year at Utopia, and learned a lot about the indigenous problem. But it seemed that for every answer you thought you'd found, there arose another puzzle. I came to the end of that time better informed certainly, but about as unsure of the underlying mystery as before. How can it be that with the application of so much effort, thought, good-will, plentiful resources, and the passage of so much time, that the problems appear to be getting, if anything, worse - or perhaps evolving into less tractable things, toughening with age like an old dead tree?

For a year or so after I finished there, I pondered this mystery and then composed a reflective essay to try to capture the way I felt about it. Then, pretty much, I started thinking about other things. I don't doubt it is still a big moral issue, but I have less confidence than before that the efforts contributed by people like me will make a lot of difference. Something about the problem really is intractable, and now even the victims seem to be helping to keep it so. It is an awful thing to contemplate - the rotten motives of colonists, the blindness of their governments, the utter confusion of modern authorities, the waste of our sympathy, and all the misdirected good will of so many decent folks. The results we want will come a little bit at a time, a few people at a time, here and there - sometimes due to what we do; sometimes despite it. But the great injustice will remain. And our big apparatus sustaining it will stay too - indefinitely perhaps, serving victims and rescuers from the same table.

I guess I left the Centre a bit sanguine, but in the next year I went back to do a couple of locum jobs - in Alice Springs, and a couple of places in the “top end”, which is what people in the Territory call the tropical region north of Katherine - one at a remote little place at the mouth of the Rose River, on the western shore of the Gulf; the other at Oenpelli, just inside the Arnhem Land reserve, over the East Alligator River. As a result, my assessment of the problem came close to disillusionment.



Well, if you've read this far, you must be patient. And I'm grateful you stuck around, because there's something I really want to say to you before ending. I left it to last because it's a bit complicated, and, to tell the truth I haven't sorted it all out myself yet. Maybe never will. But here goes.

I said before that I've lived in extraordinary times - a unique episode in the history of human societies in which wealth and comfort has been created and spread to hundreds of millions of people. Kings and Emperors from long ago would be

agog at what we ordinary folks take for granted every day of our lives. And yet we are not amazed, as we should be. Nor properly thankful for our good fortune. Mostly we never give a thought to how this came about, or whether it can continue. And that, of course, is where it concerns you, my grandchildren. For if we asked this question carefully, we would soon see that the people of the future cannot possibly share this bonanza because by and by it simply must run out. Exactly when and how, we do not yet know. But we know beyond any doubt that it is not infinite, and some limits are approaching fast.

So you could say that my life germinated in turmoil and the wreckage of war, then grew sturdily, nourished by the greatest economic expansion in the world's history, and now, near its end, confronts the most perplexing puzzle ever to trouble any society - what shall we devise to replace the systems and practices that fuelled that long prosperity? And to that profound question nobody has an answer. At least not yet. And what are we to say about the spread of democratic hopes and habits to all corners of the world? How is that achievement faring towards the end of my life? Well, it's in trouble.

My own engagement with this woke up around the time the first of you were born into the world. It focussed on the effects of human activity on the climate system of Earth, a vast unsolved problem that must be managed for the sake of you, the citizens of the present century. And for that matter, for your grandkids, and for theirs. But hard though this is, it is only one face of something a lot bigger. It's a bit hard to describe exactly what this is, even though its effects are all round us. It's as if we've allowed the institutions of our societies to grow and develop like spoiled brats. And as everyone knows, it's no fun being around brats because they are way too selfish.

Was this inevitable? I don't think so. If you disagree, you are saying we got pushed into this situation by something unchangeable in human nature. But I think people have always had choices about which parts of human nature to submit to or discipline - cultivate or suppress; celebrate or proscribe. That's surely one of the big themes in the story of the development of societies. People get into heaps of trouble if they let the nasty bits of themselves run free; they do great things if they figure out how to put the brakes on those, and encourage the "better angels of our nature" instead.

That, I think, will be the project for the remainder of my time with you. Joining all the other people, young and old, all over the world, who want to steer the course of human affairs onto a better path so you don't have to deal with too much mess. The mess we left behind - we, the fortunate generation, who could have used our

bonanza to explore and cultivate new forms of fulfilment, but instead wasted a lot of it on vanities.

I do believe the democratic age has been a remarkable affirmation of human capacity. You can hardly count the blessings due to it, they've become so familiar. And yet, democracy has turned out to be more fragile than many people thought - something that must be cared for, thought about, refurbished, and debated. Above all, it must be able to diagnose its ills and respond to changing conditions of life. Right now, we have a lot of work to do to repair and adapt our democracies, otherwise, it is certainly possible they (at least some of them) could wither and fall.

The funny thing is, none of the present enemies of democracy claim, or even believe that is their aim, and yet, because its defenders haven't been vigilant, the working parts of pretty much all the democracies don't run as smoothly as they once did. A serious break-down of the machinery is quite on the cards, triggered, maybe by some extra stress or other, when tired citizens decide their system was after all, too much trouble, and opt for something simpler. And you can hardly blame them. An oligarch only needs obedience, but a healthy democracy asks for steady effort from its people, alertness and commitment. And a dysfunctional democracy can look pretty ugly.

As I thought about this, I realised that things like the economic and political systems aren't just 'out there' - sets of arrangements that people cook up over the years that run like an engine - they are also inside us all. You and I didn't invent the system, and we aren't just one of its thoughtless cogs either. We participate by incorporating the rules (and perhaps the values) of those things into our habits. They get into the brain, and affect our choices, preferences, tastes, and the way we spend our time, the way we love, and the kind of life we think of as a good life. Strange?

It is strange. But it isn't all gloomy. The democracies flourished because people appreciate the experience of using power responsibly. 200 years ago everyone would have laughed if you'd suggested huge slabs of the world could be governed by ordinary citizens without a King. But that's how it turned out. Because of what we've learned, we won't ever go back to where we were then. But what we do next is still a very open question.

Some people have said the ecological problems are so big and so hard that democracies can never fix them. They say we'll need decisions made by some agent with a monopoly of power. But anyone who's thought about the experience of the 1930's and 40's, when democracy nearly vanished, will cringe when they hear that. The lessons that were written out for us around the time I began life are

both simple and indispensable. We don't have to decide if humans are more competitive than cooperative. We have to acknowledge they are both, and find enterprises that use both of those tendencies, turning them into creative channels. Competition can be creative, and creativity can be destructive. Cooperation is the best way to resolve contradictions like this. It always has been.

I put a line under here because it's a few years since I wrote anything. And right now I want to take it up again. Why? Well, one immediate reason is it's March 2020, the year of the virus, and I can just imagine you, telling your own grandkids one day about this time. We're here at home at Pine Mountain, with no visitors, connected by the phone and iPad, with time to think. Then, there are a couple of other reasons. Alwyn died last year. She had no cancer last time I was writing this, but now, as the meaning of what happened slowly shapes itself, I see that I must write again, not sure about what to say - yet her fate has somehow clarified something every autobiographer must confront.

If you ever think about the wonderful creativity of human beings - the things we do with our imaginations, the way we cooperate to make big things happen, the fecundity of our love and generosity, and what Hamlet called "the beauty of the world" - then you will know about truth. It's been said that the only completely truthful human is a new-born baby. Because we cannot help ourselves; we simply must protect our reputations as we go. And that means telling stories with ourselves in them, we always make some of it up. Sometimes leaving things out; sometimes adding gloss; sometimes remembering sideways. Of course I have done all that. I just hope I have done it with some judgement, and that it is not disingenuous. But that is something you will decide.

The thing is, for the six years Alwyn lived with her illness, and in the weeks we spent with her last year, she taught us things that seem to me more important than anything I've recorded before. I thought I would try to tell you about them if I can. They have to do with courage; but mostly they have to do with truth, and beauty.

A little while ago I got an email from Alwyn's nurse, the one assigned to her for the three months or so she was in palliative care at home. She was a discerning, as well as a caring woman, competent, insightful and deliberative. Several times she told me she had never met anyone like Al, and I could see there was something about the experience of caring for her that impressed her very much. For me, this thing was something to do with her unusual courage - the way she first struggled with the idea of terminal illness, then came to terms with it, eventually accepting

the loss, the suffering and the many discomforts along the way. To Gina, her nurse, by the time they met in April 2019, exactly six years after her diagnosis, when Alwyn's forbearance was perfectly clear, this was something exceptional.

All of us saw that. Her many friends spoke of it, and it was a constant inspiration to everyone who knew they would soon exchange her presence for a memory. But I felt that Gina was moved by something else. And I began to wonder if it had to do with another thing I came to understand. Once in a while I saw it clearly: that courage was a kind of beauty. It even seemed sometimes to shine from her. And when I thought about it, I could see that this was a revelation of something human that we don't see or notice much - the dignity and greatness of being human, a glimpse of how it can or should be - that the human world is utterly full of the pervasive mystery of our existence. Al never found words for this. She didn't need to; she lived it, and in those last weeks, it shone forth so that we who live still can bear that gift, and become donors in our turn.

Gina told me when she wrote, it had taken almost a year for her to reply because she hardly knew how to express what the experience had meant. She said Alwyn showed her something boundless about the human spirit. It had changed her practice, and her understanding of terminal care. I thought of something young Hamlet had said when he was thinking about this, our unfathomable potential: "in action how like an angel! in apprehension how like a god! the beauty of the world."

And I remembered what Helen had said one time, when Al, wasted and hardly able to walk after weeks of not eating, decided to go to the homeware store. Brushing off our objections, hair flowing in the wind, as she beheld the outside again and felt the sunshine. Helen said she looked more alive than all of us who had not stared down that abyss, as she had. Radiant, transcendent even, a little expansion of consciousness into being and not-being; apparently alone in her journey, she was nonetheless a living affirmation of something involving all of us.

I've been wondering lately, how to memorialise this. She wanted her kids to remember her, not just as a Mom, but as a person - something that can happen as they grow up. And so she wrote notebooks and a journal for them. Her friends, like Gina, all spoke of their friendship as a gift, an enriching thing; and whenever I heard that from them I thought of how such things enter the web of life, the human circle each of us inhabits, and propagate there, where they become virtues in people yet unborn. Although she only wished this for her family, I think she would have quite liked that idea - that the 46 years she spent here with us created things that live indefinitely, and bind the human world together.



It's a while since I wrote anything here, but it feels as though everything has changed - the sort of project I set out to make for you, the various meanings I wanted to include, and the significance of events. Let me explain.

In June 2021, exactly two years after Alwyn died, Lloyd came round one afternoon and spoke a short sentence: "I've got some shitty news." I remember specially two sensations that followed what he told us next - first a strange feeling that comprehension, the usual effect of words passing into your ears, wasn't working - as if Lloyd's words went inside and got lost. Second, an explicit thought like this: 'Hang on - that's my nightmare, not yours.' Smoking when I was young and going in the Sun without a shirt, foolish things that might as well be punished with cancer. The thought expressed a kind of incredulous outrage that punishment had landed in the wrong place.

That afternoon was the start of something that went on for two and a half years, until he died of cancer just before Christmas last year. I still don't know of anyone who's lost two of their kids this way, although there must be some. No acquaintance knows of anyone either. I thought I should tell you about some of the things I learned on this journey.

We humans don't seem to have what it takes to confront the fact of mortality. We can teach ourselves to do it, but naturally, we are baffled. Our fear of death is different from that of other creatures, I think, because of the quality of our consciousness. We think about the future. And we wonder about the past. And we imagine things - that is, create bits of the world in our minds in a way that is uniquely compelling. This truth is often stated by saying that humans inhabit two worlds - the one that preceded us, the planetary surface, and one we make for ourselves out of imaginings, language, symbols, and cultural practices. As a result, we can contemplate our existence and non-existence - with limits.

But we can't make sense of them. This bewildering condition is why we make up stories - to persuade ourselves it's all OK. One of the things I discovered while we lived with Lloyd's illness is that the motives for inventing those stories come from something you can think of as like an old wine cellar or dusty library in the mind, full of 'story-lines'. And the marvellous thing is that we don't need to go looking for them - they just pop out when they are needed, as if the cellar-master or librarian is all the time waiting there for the right moment. We call these skeletal stories, or themes 'intuitions'. They seem to be a complement to our expansive consciousness, so when we start wondering about imponderable stuff, explanatory suggestions are right there, before we even think. You could say they are explanations without reasons.

The idea that cancer is a punishment is like this; and the idea that it ought to be deserved is another. So is the idea that a family twice stricken this way must be 'marked', or outcast. I discovered that the apparatus we use to respond to false, unbidden explanatory ideas - our deliberative capacities - cannot disable intuitions, only answer them. The contents of that old library are not ours to dispose of; apparently, they come with the package. The stories they evoke are embellished variously in the ways of cultural diversity, but the subconscious repertoire is with us for good or ill, part of our evolutionary heritage, and permanent. They turn out to be very durable, efficient (in the sense that they are always there when triggered) and in their own way, coherent, so their explanatory work comes with a sense of inevitability.

After a time, I realised that this second disaster had triggered intuitions quite different from the first one. As I remember, Alwyn's illness came with a bunch of 'if only' thoughts ... had she gone to the doctor sooner; had she been in Australia with a GP; had she not trusted the internet ... and so on. Alternative histories we would have preferred. There was the awful thought of this loving person of vitality required to part from the people who meant most to her. Thoughts about how suffering is distributed in the world. And the intrusive thought that something so precious could surely not disappear finally, leaving no trace, just as if she had never been.

I remember greeting these unconscious guests, and thinking they had no persuasive force. Refutations were easy, and besides, Alwyn herself refuted them with her forbearance and grace. Those were the food for our reflections. They were among the gifts she left for us, so that we journeyed with her (as far as we could) as related people, sharing sensations in the evolving story of what was happening to her. This, I came to understand, is one of the ways we can reveal the greatness inherent in us all. It is an essentially humanising way of being because we make the most of our reflective, deliberative selves, using them as counterweights to the intuitive repertoire, which otherwise, warrantless and unsolicited, makes our world explicable in its own prejudicial way.

Not so with Lloyd. Almost immediately, the half-formed idea of a curse turned up. I found it persistent in a way I'd never encountered before. It didn't matter how often it was addressed, it would go back to its lair and then creep out again. It seemed to be ineradicable, which is to say, it is just as human as anything else in our catalogue of gifts - insight, compassion, creativity - anything. Its the same with other unsolicited thoughts - I failed to protect my kids; they've been punished for my sins; such misfortune warrants the status of outcast. We have the concept of randomness as an answer to these - yet I found that, rather than abolishing them, the answer itself seemed to fade and retreat.

In the couple of weeks after that day in June, Lloyd underwent a number of procedures to assess his disease. I vividly remember a day we had been to see the radiation oncologist to make some plans, and learned the cancer was everywhere. The same idea appeared to both of us - rather rapid extinction with barely enough time to get used to it, let alone make preparations and reconciliation. We decided to visit the local brewery.

As we walked out of the hospital, a call came from the guy we just left. He said he'd just seen the biopsy result. The cancer would respond to a drug that was simple to use, had few side-effects, and would deal with each and every bit of the disease. So we returned to the hospital pharmacy and began what turned out to be a year and a half of remarkable remission. On the walk from pharmacy to brewery, we wondered what to make of this. One minute, rotten fortune; only to be reversed by a phone call in the next. How can fortune and caprice live together and both be coherent? It looked as though we'd just had a lesson about the limits of rationality. Reasonable folks like us can never escape the tug of ideas like 'fortune'. Why? Because closer to our origins, we needed a cognitive bias which attributed agency to everything. We're stuck with it.

During the two and a half years that came after, it's been the same. No matter what, a family of notions has shadowed our experience of Lloyd's 'fortune', and still does. The remission lasted, just as the clinician promised, eighteen months; then a series of measures, until, towards the end of last year, the disease overwhelmed him.

I have learned that our experience of the world, together with our understanding, is formed in a community of our fellows. Its foundations are made of received impressions, organised by and with a set of organic intuitions, inseparable from our human nature, and always at hand to serve as 'first responders' in our work of comprehending.

I do not know if they ever entirely relinquish their hold on our judgements - I suspect not. I'm quite certain they are universal because I can see (or perhaps infer) that other people are in the same predicament. That's why I'm still wary of taking people into my confidence about what has happened, or discussing it with people who know. Only a few close friends are interested. Others, I imagine, have as much trouble as I do dismissing the ideas about fate, freakishness' and deserving.

I mentioned Alwyn's courage and the revelation that came with it. Now, after half a year, I think I can say that Lloyd too came to know the naked fact of his

mortality, as she did, face to face with the awful truth, a lone human spirit confronting the mystery of existence. If I had to describe how this was different for them, I would say something like this. Alwyn the organiser had six years and a firm and supportive network of loyal friends as assets. She travelled through the stages into a reconciled state. Toward the end, she was able to contemplate her parting from us with more equanimity than those she left behind. Lloyd had a metaphysical interest in the events, which we sometimes discussed. He mostly communicated implicitly. He never complained.

The course of cancer treatment has plenty of ups and downs, and towards the end, more than enough of pain, indignity, discomfort and frustration. I do not think it is stoic to bear this as he did (that is, screw up your courage like a soldier). It looks to me more like dignity - a sort of affirmation that, if we can enjoy the beauty of being a human, then we can bear the knowledge of death and its disappointment too. Just like Al, he wasn't ever interested in the metaphor of 'fighting' cancer, which is so common amongst us. He wanted to use every available intervention with a reasonable chance of working. He wanted to understand the rationale and to see for himself whether it looked like a decent bargain or not. But his calculations were never desperate. He seemed to know, with some sure sense, that a fully developed human being can find it in themselves to accept this condition of life - that it must end, if not late then soon.

Having told you about puzzling 'automatic' responses to these experiences, I'd better tell you the following little story. It took place in August 2023, when Lloyd and I went camping. He knew by then that time was short, but he was in reasonable shape, so we set out to explore some places in the north-west he wanted to see, and to search for a particular aboriginal artefact he'd read about but never seen.

There is an old quarry near Mt Isa where, for thousands of years, the hard, fine-grained basalt has been extracted to make a unique style of axe, called the 'discoid axe' for its unusual shape. These tools were highly prized by their aboriginal owners, and not discarded readily. They were durable, sharp, and heavy, and traded from this region over a large part of the continent. It was rare to encounter one in a museum (although we did find one in the little museum in Boulia). Lloyd thought the most likely place to find one would be along the rivers south of Mt Isa, so that is where we went.

For a fortnight, he searched every likely place we came to, walking or running miles, scouring sandhills, creek banks, claypans - wherever his trained eye suspected. We found other interesting things, but no discoids. Finally, we turned for home, and on the evening of the last day of searching, about a half hour out

of Bedourie where we anticipated one of their nice hot showers, he said one last time - 'let's check this out'. He ran off to the sand hill, while I mooched near the car thinking about that shower. Then I heard a yell. I thought he might have stepped on a snake, but when I went over, he was staring at two discoid axes lying on the sand, as if they had been placed there the day before. They were beautiful specimens - one so perfect, it might have been unused; the other a carefully repaired one. They must have lain there undisturbed for a hundred years.

He was more excited than I've ever seen him. We forgot all about showers and made camp right there, and of course, fell to wondering about this turn of 'fortune'. What were the circumstances in which the original owner simply left his precious tools out there? How did he employ these finely crafted implements in his daily tasks? What sort of life had been led in that spot? But behind these interesting reflections, there was another, rather inchoate one - why had our quest, on the very brink of failure, been rewarded in this extravagant way?

We sat down with a couple of nice whiskeys, to chew over these things as darkness fell. Watching the rising moon, I suddenly became aware of a big white bird hovering 20 feet above us, as silent as a ghost. Before long, without a sound, it drifted down the breeze into the gathering night, and was gone. Then it returned, hovering. This happened a few times before it departed for good. A barn owl is an impressive creature - snowy white beneath, with a wing span of a metre, broad wings and absolutely silent in flight. A close sighting like this inevitably brings with it a supernatural feeling - even if, like us, you have no idea what 'supernatural' is.

We now had a double reason to wonder about auspices. It is surprising how strong the feeling can be - that some event, of which you are the centre, is connected to a cosmic, or perhaps you could say, an invisible and unaccountable source of both will, and purpose. So it was with us that night, sipping and wondering. That was when we noticed a star low in the western sky that should not have been there. After observing it a short while, it winked and went out. Then it reappeared, and did this several times. It was undoubtedly a MinMin light. They are specially famous in that district. For years, various explanations have been given for them, from the improbable and ridiculous to more or less robust scientific accounts. But as far as I can tell, the full range of their appearances is still not satisfactorily explained.

Locals, of course emphasise their other-worldliness, something we had treated with amused cynicism. But our encounter happened to coincide with a sense of omen. If this vision had happened any other night, I dare say we'd have thought it interesting. But then and since, I've been quite unable to shake a feeling that it was more than interesting. It was significant. To make this thought coherent, I have to

summon a rational judgement. Yes, it's absurd. But the fact is, that quality is a part of the experience, no matter what. We are not really in a position to dictate to our feelings that they should depart. We can only decide the extent to which they contribute to the judgements we make from our conscious choices and deliberations.



We all have a deep need to understand our world as a place that makes sense. We look for causes - and find them. And we are very interested in finding the world to be fair and just, even though ordinary experience refutes this constantly. It is the way we are. I know quite well that, for most of human existence, parents have mourned the loss of their children routinely. But these are not our expectations - they belong to a former time, so that, had it been proposed a few years ago that we would be there when our two first kids left the world, it would have seemed incomprehensible, fantastic.

Now that it has happened, incredulity has become a kind of dissonance, a disorderly accompaniment to the enduring feelings of sadness. I am sad, and I expect to be for some time, but I do not mourn for myself. It is for them, who lost everything. With our act of creation, we began something which became those people. We brought about two new instances of the life-gift which is everything

for those in whom it embodied. We now stand in need of reasons, which shall never be supplied.

I know this bafflement is the common lot of our kind, repeated countless times - yet ours is just one. There may be one small saving grace. It is a thought, an insistent one, which first came that mid-summer in America five years ago - that what we must do now is (I don't know a better way to express this) to become worthy of them. It's an idea that only makes sense by begetting actions, and I suspect it has a moral kernel, which might be something like this ... the life un-lived - maturing with spouses; kid's graduations; grandchildren, and the thousand sweet and precious attachments they will never know - this might be honoured in some way by remembering, and caring, and by being.



I have on the wall a picture of the world. It's a photograph sometimes called 'the blue marble', taken by one of the Apollo 17 astronauts in December 1972, when Alwyn was a couple of months old. It became the most reproduced photograph ever taken. People seemed to share some of the astronauts' astonishment at the vision of this perfectly round, sunlit sphere, with its moving clouds, alone - very alone - in a background so black, and so vast it is incomprehensible.

And yet, it's our Earthly home. We take pictures of it all the time. Why is this one so stirring? Edgar Mitchell, another astronaut, might have had a bit of the answer; from up here, he said, you can't see any of those boundaries that are so important from down below. Carl Sagan probably had the rest when he said this 'pale blue dot', a speck in the universe, had been the host for every king, every thief, every lover, every conquering army, every story-teller, child, priest, and tyrant who ever lived. All acting out their central role in the drama of life, and all fully persuaded of their uniqueness and world-filling significance.

Millions of people have seen the photograph, but only a couple of dozen men saw the real thing - our planetary home from 30,000 kilometres away. They were all profoundly moved by the sight. You can tell from their words that there was something ineffable about the experience, as if suddenly knowing - really knowing - that Earth is a planet; this recognition caused words to dry up or lose their power to convey.

I mention this because right now, democracy is in trouble - big trouble - and sooner than I had imagined. And it occurred to me that there is an interesting connection between this crisis in our affairs and the blue marble. Perhaps I can put it like this: a bit of perspective helps us to see that the human family has just one home - a congenial dot in a hostile infinity. We are like the crew of a life-raft in mid-ocean, who's circumstances raise the rewards of cooperation to their maximum. It seems to me the idea of democracy is the political concept closest to this understanding. Competing can look like fun - and we do plenty of it - but it's not hard to see that creating losers is a mug's game, a lousy way to run things, which only guarantees unstable conditions forever - no way to manage a small and very lonely life-raft.

But cooperating is entirely different. It is a human specialty. We are the most inventive and productive cooperators in the living world, by a long way. Nothing else comes close. And we've never even come near to the limits of our cooperative capacity - if there are any. Democracy is an invitation to explore that capacity - to create, and then re-create all the ways of making collective decisions we can dream up, training ourselves all the while, to treat ourselves and others as though we were all together in that life-boat, until we disembark.

A remorseful man, accounting for his actions, said once: “I tormented him because I didn’t know who he was”. I guess you’d agree, there’s an implied moral principle here. The (fictional) speaker seems to be saying two things: ‘If I’d known who he was I wouldn’t have tormented him’; and ‘It’s OK to torment people you don’t know’.

The first statement says that how I treat people depends on their relationship to me; the second stipulates a condition for mistreating them. Can you see a familiar moral theme here, or do you think this man is being original? I think, regrettably, his proposal is a universal one. It is just the old idea that humans are identified by groups, and that it is a virtue to favour one’s group and prejudice the others. You could say that it has been possibly the most valuable achievement of civilization to invent an antidote for this exclusive principle which has been the cause of untold suffering, destruction, hubris and folly.

That remedy is the idea that being human makes us equal. Simple as that. Democracy is the political practice which takes for granted the greatness and dignity of every person. Much political work is needed to turn this egalitarian claim into a program. But that is the essential task of democracy - to get the blue marble life-boat crew all rowing the same way, by persuasion, not force.

But we’re not hearing much about this now. Discontent makes us impatient. Dictators get things done. We had a very keen lesson last century about what can happen when charming or ruthless guys get a lot of power - but we forget. It seems you need perspective to see the democratic case, just as you do to see Carl Sagan’s point.