



The half-time turning point

Returning to Australia and to the stark truth that I was in literal terms a bastard, came as a sledgehammer blow to the balls! But what seemed at that moment of realization a debilitating below-the-belt delivery, began to wane in significance, given the detachment of time. There were other things to worry about, which revolved around trying to claw back an earlier existence that I had known, before leaving those sunny antipodean shores for a lengthy stay north of the equator.

By this time of home-coming I had reached my mid-twenties - the prime of life many say - a long-haired individual with dark sideburns, *Groucho-style* moustache and rust-coloured flares, humming along to *Imagine* and in tune with the flavours of the day. But despite the hippie exterior, the inner me remained decidedly influenced by conservative circles, whether in family or workplace mode. Then, as my thirties crept over the horizon it slowly began to dawn that somewhere buried inside me was a different set of values, to discover and to out!

Many people of course change direction during their thirties: they jump to a different lane on the highway ... even another highway altogether. Halfway there in life, is not unlike half-time at a football match, with pressing need to re-organise your game and put on a better display for the second segment. In life, the number *three-zero can* loom as the forward scout: the mid-term alarm bell. In my case this was undoubtedly true; until the 30s emerged on the horizon I had lived, to a large degree, within a protected cocoon of conservative mumbo jumbo. At 30, I became aware of the need for some sort of metamorphosis: to change persona; stand by hidden beliefs and spread my wings.

Perhaps protected is not the most accurate description. Stultified by my inner circle would be more apt. I look back in horror when I recall that for a while, I admired the likes of Malcolm Fraser in Australia and Maggie Thatcher in Britain. It was Labor leader Gough Whitlam's overthrow that started the first few stones tumbling to form an eventual avalanche. It was only then I gradually began to grasp the inequities involved; that I needed to do something to address my very own white man's privilege.

A few years before this, the *White Australia Policy* had begun to niggle at my mind. I thought: "*Why should people be barred just because their skin is not the same colour as mine (and all the folks I knew)?*" And I learnt this policy had existed in various forms for more than 50 years! Then, when Sir John Kerr, the Queens representative at that time, threw out Whitlam, my bulwark of home-grown one-dimension thinking was finally breached. But probably more than the unusually named *Gough* – both physically and intellectually a giant of a man - I admired his left-hand sidekick, the de-throned treasurer Doctor Jim Cairns: at heart an academic, who took to a soapbox in downtown Canberra. He had a tramp-like – and compared to his boss, alternatively small - look about him; but spoke like an inspired prophet, albeit with a rasping Aussie twang. What he said and wrote, under such titles as *Growth to Freedom*, began to make good sense to my slowly budding conscience. Looking back, this period was my watershed: a pivotal interlude steering me towards the left side of the pitch.

Yet for a number of years my comfort cocoon remained reasonably intact: jostled and disturbed perhaps, but none-the-less still in place. In the late 1970s for example, I recall hanging on Thatcher's words; thinking of her as an enlightened spirit on track to transform the world. How wrong I was. Years later, in retrospect, I felt slightly less guilty after reading she had a similar effect on more acclaimed minds, who should have also known better. The late Christopher Hitchens for example was suitably mesmerised.

At the time, my thinking steadily evolved to the point where the mid-thirties brought a much more dramatic shift. This came about in two forms: a strangely restrained separation from my first wife, along with self-driven closure of affiliations with private industry ... including my own work. Each brought about a resounding knock-on effect: at home from one partner to another, and at work from one career to another. Like a rabbit

caught in headlights I was unable to explain my actions; my partner was a delightful (and without doubt, long-suffering) person, while the job was fulfilling and paid well. Put simply, I felt (rightly or wrongly) that each was inhibiting my ability to change direction, in light of new and revised thinking. In truth, it was extremely hard to justify of course.

Separation at the personal level was by no means easy, involving a loving relationship which had lasted for more than a decade - with many memories at home and abroad - and my first-born son, then only seven years old. In hindsight, I must admit it was totally self-inflicted and to some degree quite selfish. I should have found a better way.

In terms of the workplace and in a professional sense, it was also something of a seismic shift, which marked the end of a career in agriculture – springing initially from an upbringing on a farm in England – spanning almost two decades. The move terminated my link to the Australian farming scene and signalled the end of many close relationships with colleagues and friends. Again, there was some degree of guilt buried along with my friendships; I had turned my back on people I knew so well, in the name of ideology, and in most cases I never even glanced over my shoulder, to atone for something which (like the separation from my partner) they probably did not deserve.

Like throwing logs on the campfire, all this happened in parallel with a return to studies, which in turn fanned the flames. I was keen to learn more about things around me and thoughts within me that were zeroing in on my mind. Thus, at thirty-five I returned to university. Then, just as the embers were beginning to subside, I was bowled over by a new love, who arrived with recent and (for me) quite enticing experiences of globetrotting wanderlust and alternative lifestyle. Within a year or so, I had returned to Britain with new partner and son on board, to re-unite with the family of my childhood.

Like Sydney Harbour Bridge, the thirties proved to be my *self-development decade*, spanning across the waters, from disclosure of heritage at one end in Australia, to a return to the original womb of family at the other, in England: in short, from stark revelation to historical reality. And of course, as is often the case, that reality revisited could never resume where it left off in childhood. This is neatly symbolized by a poem I wrote not long into the new millennium, after a number of fleeting expeditions to the place where I had come of age, and finally to resume residence there in the late 1990s:

Mixed Emotions

*Back where it all started from
After a whole world of new experience.
Still the same soul, on a mound of leaves,
As I look to the fields in view.
Part of the same bank, by a familiar road.
The same mound, but a changed mound:
The same hedge changing in time,
As the years of man change the road alongside.*

*Mountains of green built on layers of green,
Pile on top of the other from valley floor.
From where I sit near the pillar-red box
(That wisdom of memory tells me
Used to reside in the stone wall opposite),
This abundant, lush growth of high summer sun
Bears no resemblance, but reliance to
The cool, dark days that have gone before.*

*For this verdant plumage that tumbles down
From the top of 'Great Hill' and 'The Break',
Shows an exquisite and matching exterior,
But my mind knows the forbidden halls.
Now an outsider (of sorts), between generations,
(that in itself, a secret to keep from some people),
I am privy to some of the deeper secrets
Of this neatly framed and pristine world.*

*And (let's not beat around the bush),
These are momentous secrets that if told as one,
Seem so incredulous as to beggar belief;
A Peyton Place in a Cornish field.
Even today I was told two more:
Of drunken 'fight to the death' and elderly misdeeds.
But even from my privileged viewpoint,
I can only guess at the iceberg unseen.*

*I love coming back to my past,
To cherished people and places chosen to leave
All those so many long years ago,
(because of that choice, now forbidden to me).
But I still look for escape to a wider world
That holds greater perspective: release from creed.
Torn now between many vibrant parts:
Jack of all places, but master of none!*

***These secret thoughts are all revealed
In one momentary action of mine,
As family stood for 'Proms in the Park',
I could not sing those memorized words.
They seemed to come from a past once known,
Clashing with those truths from a wider scene,
To show of a world that I thought long gone,
But one that I cannot dispel.***

Cornwall, August 2001 (after reading Tagore)

Through this transformational period my destiny was guided - for better or for worse - by an assortment of influential mentors, mostly but not all, male. From boyhood through to the later years, an attraction to flamboyant male characters has been one of my distinct personality traits. This is not in any way a sexual attraction; they and I would have each recoiled in horror and dismay at such a proposition! No, from my side it's to do with being drawn to those who don't conform to the norm: often, but not always, oddballs such as Tom (the *airborne* boss from my first real job) or Harold (my mechanical friend, well known for his colourful phrases), both role models of what not-to-do, as well as what to-do, which I think intrigued and pulled me towards them. I could liken it to being fascinated by chameleons: creatures with special charms and disguised qualities.

I guess, if I had to admit it, I was indeed intrigued by the hidden side – the dark side of their moons - and the fact that I was sometimes pulled into their web as an accomplice; organizing one-off dalliances for Tom or hiding *hot* TVs for Harold: that fascinated me. They each came with a flamboyance and devil-may-care attitude, with non-conformist, at times objectional views, toward life ... and they both drank too much. I was drawn to them, in the same way I was attracted to *Christopher Hitchens*, who though highly intellectual, exhibited some of these traits in his role as international media star, philosopher and author; thus, perhaps managing to offend half the population.

Hitchens famous line: "*If I'd known I was going to live so long I would have taken better care of myself,*" could have applied equally well to either Harold or Tom.

I guess these somewhat eccentric beings appealed to me as the personality I would like to inhabit if I hadn't been so shackled by the normalcy of home and work routines, which also sounds like a cop-out and a good excuse for not proclaiming a similarly strident

approach to life, as they had done. Maybe in the secrecy of my own soul I even thought that I mirrored these oddballs of the human species and could spar with them on an equal footing. In that thought I was decidedly wrong; these characters were extroverts who oozed charisma, drunk or sober, where in contrast - and for the times when I was out of their environs - I was inclined towards hiding my light under the proverbial bushel. The truth could be that I simply enjoyed being in their vicinity: basking in their resplendent and sometimes reflected glory.

There were a couple of other males around at this time, both slightly more conventional, but still with bucket-loads of charm, who stand out as people I admired beyond the norm: people I looked up to as chaperones for life. These men did not really follow in the same heavy drinking mold of Tom and Harold, though one of them – short and stocky and belly to boot - could knock back a remarkable number of pints, when pushed. No, the similarities were bound up in a combination of knowing their work roles backwards, being able to mix with allcomers ...and degrees of unadulterated charm.

Albert - my boss for the one and only time I worked with government - was a widely respected microbiologist; a fit, wiry man with jet-black, swept-back hair, full of activity compared to most of his more stodgy, scientific peers. He was of Catalonian extraction, with a deep voice that came with a wonderfully cultured Australian accent, and regardless of whether we were out in the field or back in the lab, he proved a remarkable mentor, who only lost patience with me on a handful of occasions: not bad for a five-year stint! But even in this case I was in for a surprise (like many that had arisen with Tom and Harold) when I became more attracted than I should have ever been, to one of my female workmates:

“Sorry to disappoint you George,” came the rejoinder (with little regret in her voice), *“I already have a thing going with your boss!”*

“Albert? Albert?” I thought. *“It can’t be. He’s the most upstanding person I know.”*

But it was true, and I had to retrace my steps, back to normalcy and away from the darker attractions, on that unseen side.

Ian, on the other hand, my superior when I joined a new Australia-wide team of field workers at Imperial Chemical Industries (not long after the somewhat unforeseen

revelations about Albert) was a down-to-earth Yorkshireman, with accent and beer-belly (as mentioned) to match. He was not much older than me but emitted an aura of experience that belied his years, due to his worldly knowledge. This fascinated me. His stoic manner, and the fact he was a Yorkshireman (meaning we were almost blood brothers in my rather befuddled mind) added to the case. But perhaps the most interesting link was that we both loved cricket, particularly the English variety. I will never forget the standout test at Headingley, which happened to coincide with our annual team meeting in a small Victorian country town, where Ian was Master of Ceremonies. It turned out to be, arguably, the most famous test match in history, where his namesake Ian - the redoubtable, later to be knighted Sir Ian Botham - pulled England back from the brink of defeat - from darkness into light - and in so doing, gave my boss and I the right to laud it over our Aussie compatriots, for the duration of our time together.

These assembled mentors of the period (in my mind at least) all knew each other to some degree; though Ian less so because he was something of an itinerant disciple of globalization who had spent time in Brazil, before Australia - extolling the virtues of the relatively new *Direct Drilling* methodology, where crop seeds are planted directly into untilled ground - and then after a few years would move on to do something similar in India or China. Ian knew Albert, because it was through working with Albert on the background science of the method, that I gained the experience and know-how to be able to get the job with ICI (and Ian's team) in the first place. After that there was a continuing interest from ICI towards Albert's continuing research work, which in turn gave scientific support to on-farm practical actions - supported by ICI - as more farmers began to employ the technique. Ian, the stereotypically dour Yorkshireman, who could be unreasonably critical with aspects that didn't immediately agree with his thinking, held a begrudging respect for Albert ... which suited me just fine.

As for the others, Tom and Harold connected to each other because Harold was the fixer for Tom's cars. At one time, after Tom had filled Harold's soft-top *batmobile* with rubbish during a drunken party, I thought that would be the end of the friendship - and indeed there was a bitter interlude - but after a time it all came back to normal, with either side ribbing each other about this and that. Harold also connected to Albert,

through my introduction and became his mechanic. They had a mutual respect which never extended anywhere near drunken orgies, but took on board the occasional beer.

The relationship between Albert and Tom was more complex. They were both steeped in the theory and practice of agriculture, and so in some ways, each revered the other. But their methods were towards the opposite ends of the spectrum. Tom flew by the seat of his pants while Albert, ever the true scientist, was a stickler for due diligence. So they tended to hold each other at arm's length, but underneath was substantial respect.

When I think about all this interchange between four remarkably diverse individuals, each dedicated in his own way to their work, I can truthfully say I was the conduit that brought them together. They were on independent branches of their life's tree, but through me they connected to new branches, and I was well aware that other connections followed (as they always do) along those fresh branches. This was something I noticed throughout my life, that often I acted as the connector between colleagues and friends who were progressing along parallel branches.

Now with hindsight, I am able to see that I developed these match-making skills during my time in agriculture, but it was later in life – after I myself had jumped to a different branch during my thirties - when this particular skill came even more to the fore, connecting people within the wide-ranging *Education for Sustainable Development* arena ... both within and between countries and continents. When I look back over the years, I can testify to a formidable number of academics, teachers, students, administrators, and many others, all meeting each other – and I say this in a humble way – with myself as the instigator: the go-between. And it happened, in part, because I never turned away a contact. I always held the philosophy of: *“Well you never know, something might come out of this.”* Even if I was crap at everything else on the table, I proved outstanding at bringing people together!

Through this time on my own *life's tree*, I was uniquely bound to Australia. Just prior to mid-twenties I had spent 18 months in the UK and Europe; then later, as my clock rolled past mid-thirties, I was re-invigorated to resume travels to the northern hemisphere, which continues to the present day. Looking back to this twelve-year period – my longest single span in Australia – I feel it helped me develop a new set of values, but

then on the negative side, it prevented my reaching and knowing my biological father in Scotland: something I will always regret.

I can now see my late 20s through to late 30s as being more transformational than any other period in my life; not only the time when I gained a new partner and a new type of work, in addition it provided the space to discover new ways of thinking and new perspectives, that incorporated and empathized with ideals related to equality and equity. For me it was a seismic fracture with my previous world and caused me to leap to a totally different branch on my tree of life.

In the finale of this period, I had risen to heights I could have only dreamt of when I first landed on Australia's shores less than two decades before. I had reached the point where I graduated to work alongside my old boss Tom, who had set up a new farm advisory service and asked me to join him: a bit like a young doctor or lawyer being taken on board as a junior partner in an esteemed practice. It was quite a compliment and promised to be a move that would carry me forward to greater things. As a result, and perhaps not unexpectedly, my first real mentor in this *land of opportunity* was devastated, when after a couple of years, I announced my imminent exit. He was unable to understand why, after so many years wedded to agriculture, I wanted to leave such a promising career - and by doing so, also leave him high and dry - after he had singled me out from a line of interns, then nurtured and finally anointed me as his partner. I was overwhelmed with guilt at letting Tom down, as well as a host of farmers who became close friends, and other colleagues, in the world that I knew back then.

But by that stage I was ready and wanted to move on. When I first knew Australia, it was such an eye-opener; I was mesmerized by the open spaces and my lofty ambitions. The first time I left the country - after eight years in residence - was to rubber stamp the blueprint of young Aussies doing the ritual trip - their *gap* year - back to the motherland: the mandatory coming of age custom, but always with Australia fixed firmly as the base. I had become one of them, with my home in the South and adventure to the North.

But this time, a decade after returning to that southerly base, my point of view had swung around 180 degrees, to see - in my (perhaps distorted) mind's eye - the island continent for what it was: an island; and more to the point, an island a long way from

anywhere ... an outpost on the way to antarctica! Now, it started to feel as if I had placed myself too far from the centre of the action; and that placement seemed to grow further and further away with the passing of each year. Spurred on by my new partner - a historian who had just spent two years in England and wanted to return to rekindle the flame - we both sought avidly to resume the connection, before the line was unplugged ... and it all became too late.

From that point my personal goals were:

- *to complete the studies that I had started some years before,*
- *to resume overseas travels and broaden my horizons, away from Australia, and*
- *to begin to understand new perspectives from different places, and in particular from people who weren't white.*

These objectives came together when - after resuming contact with Cornwall – I travelled together, with my new partner, to India for the first time. In theory the main agenda was to complete a mini-thesis on the practicalities of development, by exploring the delivery of an *Oxfam*-supported project in western *Maharashtra* state. In practice the journey – lasting six weeks – was an exotic adventure from beginning to end, and opened up a whole vista of new perspectives on life as I then knew it. It also marked the start of a lifelong love affair with the wonder that is India.

As a hands-on result of that first visit to the Indian sub-continent, an edited version of the text and photos from my analysis of project delivery work, eventually made it as part of a text for Australia's secondary school Geography curriculum, titled *Dilemmas of Development*. It was a promising start for me, a raw recruit, but I was very conscious that it was indeed just a start. I needed and intended to do much, much more.

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