



Whittling our Niche: the book

It was a remarkable feeling: that inner warm glow when I saw my first book in print - holding it, reading it – in many ways similar to turning the pages and finding my column in the latest edition of the local newspaper; or from years gone by, that first sight of the quarterly magazine I once produced for schools in Australia. But a 270-page book was a step above all that: a different intensity.

On a personal level, it was particularly invigorating, as I was coming to this, my fourth career, as a somewhat elderly author.

But also, because I really loved my newfound vocation. I was *In My Element*; two hours composing felt like 10 minutes. I just wished I'd come to this point 40 years earlier. But then of course, I would not have had the experience of life, to inform and embolden my writing: a CATCH-22 I guess.

Strangely, in 2020, the Coronavirus pandemic was my starting point. I'd written before, but when Covid hit, I locked myself away in the back-blocks of Shanzu, on the tropical coast of Kenya, and got serious. I was no IT expert, but the meagre skills I did possess enabled me to develop a basic website, which was used in-the-main as a safe place to store files (which grew and grew to a total of 250 articles). Then I happened to meet a local newspaper's editor, which led to and many of those articles being refined for two monthly columns: ***Sustainable Change***, and ***Travelling Light***.

During that period of writing the newspaper columns, and somewhat in parallel, I began to piece together the book - ***Whittling our Niche: from the tree of life*** - much of which was also drawn from the myriad of website articles. If you go to the online site today, you can ferret out various pieces from the book, but fragmented in form, less cohesive and less refined than the completed text.

The book recounts a range of experiences over time, including a number of death-defying near fatalities, which I now look back to with a degree of disbelief. But in addition, much of the book revolves around travel, often relating to work, but sometimes purely to unadulterated pleasure.

For example, from Australia there are numerous tales of airborne exploits: rural escapades with the pilot on my knee, then alongside another aviator - my boss - who suddenly tells me:

“You take over, I feel like a nap.”

“Hello! What the hell does that mean?” My initial muted response.

But my ever-extending lifespan includes many ups and downs. Those sky-high adventures ended with vivid memories of our six-seater plane in free-fall, heading towards shark-infested seas. More local examples include a high-speed car crash near Kericho, then quite recently, coming face-to-face with Al-Shabaab in Westgate.

To even the score, excursions into the education world of India, plus a variety of accounts from Europe and South-East Asia, can re-emerge as extraordinarily happy times. I vividly remember a 15-year-old schoolgirl, in the orange-suited robes of a famous freedom fighter, confronting me, the supposed colonial ruler, on the podium; and still feel a lump in my throat if I recall her 4,000 schoolmates that day, in the multi-coloured attire of the Telugu community, standing in unison to sing their national anthem.

“Who is that girl?”, I asked the principal, sitting alongside me.

“Oh, that’s Jaya, our head girl. Would you like to meet her?”

The narrative abounds with many such accounts, as I traverse a meandering path across four continents, spread over five decades, and encompassing three careers.

Coursing to some degree under the surface, I search for some meaning. Some reason for those near-fatalities; and indeed, whether our stories are worth telling at all, considering our miniscule time as an itinerant in this enormous universe.

With that in mind, I end the text with a perceptive quote from the late Christopher Hitchens - a long-admired writer - who said shortly before his death:

***‘The written word will remain, that’s true;
but it won’t be much comfort to me’.***

WHITTLING OUR NICHE from the tree of life.

Available in paperback from the publisher Austin Macauley, Amazon, or as an e-book.

