



New Lands and Fresh Lifestyles

Consciously or subconsciously, we all evaluate our progress as we move from branch to branch on our *Tree of Life*. This notion encompasses everyone: front-runners who have reached the pinnacle of their chosen field; folk at the other extreme struggling with everyday matters at a local level. Are we happy with our trajectory? Do we need to change things to incorporate other elements?

Any re-appraisal conjures with past, present and future. We factor in aspects such as what we have accomplished to get to that point in time, what we are doing now (which changes from present to past every millisecond), and where we want to be in the future. These constant assessments of progress related to goals can be at very different levels: cooking a meal, providing clean water for a village, winning Olympic gold, becoming president of a nation. It's unlikely that cows and koalas have the aptitude for such things, but we humans can't resist reflective analysis on a very regular basis.

Continuing George's story

In terms of re-evaluating progress, George was no different. Having adopted Australia in his teens with a degree of blinkered gusto, by the end of his twenties he saw a country where a fair proportion of white males, all immigrants themselves, got half-pissed before *six o'clock closing* (the *six-o'clock-swill* as it was termed) whilst, with a sort of incomprehensible logic, loudly chastising the rightful aboriginal owners of the place, as lazy alcoholics, and then criticizing most newcomers to the country because they had the cheek to gatecrash the cosy existence the incumbents already enjoyed. For George, this was beginning to seem paradoxical in the extreme!

But there was another critique going on within his mind, which ran parallel to the wider society and focused on his own part within the broader play. In his newly adopted land, he had travelled a somewhat privileged path via private school and college, to arrive at work in the corporate sector, an environment in-the-main peopled by white males, both those he worked alongside, and the farming fraternity he connected to. His workplace

mirrored the wider Australiana, a recurring, scripted drama of racism, sexism, and elitism. By age thirty he was turned off by the whole thing! *Lucky Country?* The chief reason for it being *lucky* was because such a small percentage of the planet's population existed on such a large tract of (stolen) land: 20 million on an island continent twice the size of India! (which in stark contrast, was at that time the domicile of about 800 million people).

George himself throws more light on the subject:

"My own history shows clearly that the reality of experience influences what one thinks and does. Nature slowly becomes engulfed by nurture. The first twenty years or so, were for me predominantly rural, with decidedly Victorian overtones. I allowed myself to become immersed in this comfort zone: to get pulled along by family gripe, when I was very young. I was told in those early days, that Clement Atlee and the Labour Party destroyed private industry in Britain during the late 40s; then when I first went to Australia, I was quite content to exist under the ethos of the White Australia Policy, with its definite similarities to Apartheid in South Africa.

Later, when well into my twenties and from inside my Australian bubble, I began to see some of the flaws, and to ask some searching questions. I came to realise that in fact Labour under Atlee re-shaped the British welfare state, including reforms of education, plus establishment of the NHS, and that repeal of the White Australia Policy (1967) came not long after slavery was abolished in the USA (1965). No wonder then that Martin Luther King Jr. uttered those most memorable words 'I have a Dream' in 1963, before being eliminated by an assassin's bullet, in '68.

'I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin but by the content of their character.'

The full quote carried a great deal of resonance for me, even within the far-removed context of Australian."

Of course, as with many things in life, it wasn't all black and white; there were many shades of grey in between. George came to know some exceptionally good people who owned large tracts of land, but whose suffering could be immense when times were made tough by lack of rain, or perhaps locust invasion. He recalls the terror of a mouse plague in wheat growing areas: the road in the headlights a sea of tiny dark creatures scurrying this way and that; his track had gained life, moving with mice. In conversation with a farmer friend, he listened in horror to bedtime stories of mice nibbling the ears and toes of the man's kids, whilst fast asleep! Many of this land-owning clique were true friends, and he felt a sense of guilt for turning away from them: abandoning the good ship of white privilege!

George again:

“During my third and fourth decades, the political views I aspired to, veered markedly from right to left. Not long after Aborigines were given back their long-forbidden right to vote, Sir John Kerr, the Queen’s representative – perhaps from a debilitating haze of G&Ts, and oblivious to the fact things had moved on since the days of Empire - sacked the reforming Labor party leader, Gough Whitlam; while in other parts of the world, the ever-present Cold War and the rise of Thatcherism, enabled Rupert Murdoch and his own burgeoning, reactionary empire, to flourish. Who of sound mind would not want to move left, in the face of this abuse of power from the right?”

This negative take on the world at large, which had slowly seeped into his being, was reinforced by a return to university studies. The halls of academia provided a new take on it all: showing ways in which challenges could be met and rectified. George then moved to corroborate theory by putting it into practice (a trait which he later developed further) with first a study visit to village India, and later through project work across the wider India and neighbouring Bangladesh. He found this new focus exhilarating. He was where he wanted to be, doing work he enjoyed: exploring perspectives to underpin equality. And the roots of this work tracked back to dictates from his boyhood life; it was hard to avoid maxims like *Waste Not Want Not*, when working at ground level in India!

But though he became a *Leftie*, his views were still to some degree, moderate and controlled. He did do the occasional protest march, but he was not one for throwing raw eggs, or rotten tomatoes. He recognized the values of compromise and consensus, understanding that most things in life can never be viewed solely from one side of the spectrum; there were nearly always competing opinions to go with any topic or argument. The two disciplines of environment and agriculture for example, can be diametrically opposed; but having worked as an agriculture advisor, before moving to environmental education, George was able to view each from either side of the same coin, well aware that environmentalists or agriculturalists could on occasions be right, while at other times wrong; either side capable of overstepping the mark; stretching truth one way or the other. He saw that a path between opposing viewpoints and partisan positions was almost always available to be found and developed, providing both sides were up to the task.

He also came to realise that his background without a mother from five years of age, then becoming estranged from family in teenage years, before travelling alone to Australia at the age of 16, had come together to toughen him up. In many ways, the independent nature that came from having to carve out his own path, seemed to offer strength which enabled him to face obstacles and adversities thrown on his track.

George expands on this topic:

"I remember quite vividly my 21st birthday - normally a reason to party with family and friends - where I found myself sitting at a dinner table in a remote part of Australia, with people I hardly knew. They were taken aback when I announced I was '21 today'. But by then, events like that had ceased to worry me; the next day was a normal working day. I sometimes feel I can withstand difficulties, perhaps a little easier than those with more cushioned backgrounds."

Of course, George's life is a singular story – not one other member of the human species, amongst Earth's eight billion, can boast the exact same – but in some ways it is also not totally unique. Many years after he had gone through the trauma of realising the details of his heritage were a pack of lies, he was astounded to find Hollywood actor, Jack Nicholson, recounting a remarkably similar experience. For about 26 years Jack lived with people whom he believed to be his parents and older sister, then the 'sister', who was 17 years older, died of cancer. Ten years after that, he discovered the people he had grown up with, were actually his grandparents and his mother! He never knew his father. Later still, with hindsight, Nicholson commented:

"I'd say it was a pretty dramatic event, but it wasn't what I'd call traumatizing. By the time I found out who my mother was, I was pretty well psychologically formed. As a matter of fact, it made quite a few things clearer to me. If anything, I felt grateful."

At 26, George was a bit younger than Jack had been (36) by the time he became aware of his true self, but the basic story is comparable: a cover up by grandparents to protect their daughter, and her child. In essence he agreed with the movie star about being obviously affected at the time, but in the end seeing things more clearly.

There were other noticeable comparisons, in that Jack Nicholson also lived with his mother's sister, much in the same way that George had grown up with *his* mother's sisters, who were in reality his aunts. In addition, at the age of 16 years in high school, Jack was voted "class clown" and was in detention every day for the whole school year, not that dissimilar to George's school-based activities at around the same age.

Regarding his grandparents and his mother, Nicholson remarked that he was "very impressed by their ability to keep the secret, if nothing else."

George too was begrudgingly impressed by the ability of his family to maintain the same type of secret, for so many years, and as it happened, across two countries.