

Personal Stories, Familiar Tales

Tony Sheather

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“I can show you the scar, look!”

I don't remember the young chap's name, I remember he was from an Asian background and he was applying the varnish to our new home extension floor. He was showing me and the house painter, Mickey, where “an artery in my brain popped” and his scalp had to be peeled back in the ensuing surgery.

“I wear a face mask now,” he confided.

Having smelt the vile odour for a few minutes and felt dizzy and nauseous, I can only imagine the impact of four years' smelling the stuff daily. That six further years breathing the varnish with the flimsy protection of a face-mask should constitute any real degree of significant work health or safety seemed risible.

“And you keep on doing this job?” I asked aghast.

“What else can I do? This is life.”

Mickey and I exhorted the possibility of other trades and training.

Mickey asked: “Don't you want to have kids?”

The young chap replied, “Yeah ...but I'm good at this.”

Speaking to Mickey while he painted the extension, I had mentioned that my paternal grandfather in England had retired early from house-painting for health reasons. Granddad lived in England and he passed just about the time I was born so I don't know for sure but I am betting it was lead.

Mickey nodded and observed, “A few of my painter friends in Albania before I came to Australia died as young men.” We wondered if lead was the likely cause “...or asbestos”, Mickey added, shrugging his shoulders as to the possibility that he might be suffering from this himself. Clearly the then Communist Eastern Bloc placed no higher price on workers' health and safety than the capitalist West.

Of course, even Australian- born workers in ostensibly one of the world's most fortunate countries face the stresses and risks common to all capitalist industries. Sally McManus, Secretary of the ACTU (Australian Council of Trade Unions), quoted Oxfam Australia last Labor Day evidencing that the richest 1% in Australia earn more than the poorest 70%.

The divisions even within families is something that should be afforded greater scrutiny. If one cares for ageing family members while other siblings pursue careers, equality and justice are denied at the most basic unit of society. In Asia and Southern Europe there are still reminders

of the virtues indeed love of extended families despite the possibilities of emotional suffocation. The increasing number of Australians living alone, now approaching 30% of adults is surely more a sign of capitalist atomisation than sturdy independence.

Personal histories are writ large in the individual memory but no less moving or instructive when shared. I am presently reading an autobiography, “*A Clear Blue Sky*” by English cricketer, Jonny Bairstow. Born into a working-class family in Yorkshire he emulated his father David in pursuing the much-loved game.

The narrative is permeated by his often-anguished reflections upon the suicide of his cricketer father when Jonny was eight years old. We are told that enforced premature retirement when he felt he still had much to offer, financial difficulties in his efforts to create a viable small business, his wife’s cancer battle all played their part in his father’s death at 46. Situations to which many can relate.

The son’s tributes to his mother, twice attacked by cancer, are unconditional and loving. The words of the West Indian black revolutionary, lover of cricket and esteemed author C.L.R. James ring with a resonance even beyond the realm described: “What do they know of cricket who only cricket know?” (*Beyond a Boundary*, 1963).

My father came to Australia as a young man in his mid-twenties. The new world of promise disappeared in the horror of the Depression. Dad worked at jobs, such as a waiter, deemed menial by some. Not to me. I am proud of his courage and determination to study at night, ultimately becoming a radio-technician and broadcaster.

Refusal to accept a transfer to Fiji with my mother’s father ageing and ill (her mother had died when she was a child) cost him his 14-year job. I was angry for years in my youth with the bloody mindedness of his employers, AWA (Australian Wireless Association). Not for them to consider the human consequences of corporate actions.

Thereafter we struggled for years. My father twice scarred by the flaws and brutality of capitalism.

Having lost her mother at seven, my mother completed the final two years of secondary school in one in order to look after her widower father. Later she studied briefly at University before becoming a teacher. Married in her mid-30’s—compulsory resignation for female teachers in those days—she bravely supported our family through financially difficult years as Dad worked as a repairer of radios and the new form of entertainment, television.

No holidays, parties for us, too bloody busy for that. Testament to the exigencies of small businesses. Competition is as cruel here as the worker’s daily toil is so often demanding and uncertain.

When rest and relaxation were her due, she coughed up blood in 1974. Three forms of lung disease ravaged her final 14 years of life. How did a non-smoker so suffer? Passive smoking perhaps, in the days when such a seduction was common. I’m betting the toxic chemicals from the childhood family farm, the outrage of chemical embrace in all industries, was also a cause. The vitriol poured upon Rachel Carson, the silence greeting Bookchin’s “*Our Synthetic Environment*” in 1962 reflected a perverse blindness to scientific excess. Revolution bleeding with the victims. Who cared about the consequences as long as profit ensued?

My university years were dedicated to study and politics. This is what you do when you are financially challenged and on a scholarship. This is what you do when the Vietnam horror is raging and you face conscription at 20. Voting then at 21 so a double disenfranchisement-triple

if you consider it was selective lottery style conscription. (“Have your birthday chosen, one in three, and you get to go to Vietnam or two years in jail- your choice!”) Teaching at tough schools, caring and supporting elderly ailing parents in your youth. Radicalisation calls or you are a liar to life.

Ultimately, eleven years unemployed while still a young man as a carer and beyond, a non-person, the vile world of deregulation and social ostracism. Futile contracts all around the state, draining mind, desire and sinew. At last, a secure job! Then redundancy with glowing references at 53—same town as Dad, virtually same age. Rejection the weekly wage, again the loathsome indignity of the dole. “I’ve never seen a man work so hard”—the final desperately sought job must be cherished, maintained at all costs. The Pyrrhic victory of retirement with its vaunted penury.

The greatest obscenity in countries with some sense of equity is the abstract kindness of decent, fortunate people. Their conversation is polite, their good intentions manifest, their experience and understanding of the world pitiful. Yet “what do they know of life who only pleasant privilege know?” Fuck all. The pleasant veneer persists.

So, yes, suffering is bullshit but you do get to know something about the need for revolution. Transformation crying out in the very bowels of human injustice and indignity.

Dick Shearman was one of the more prominent radical students at Queensland University in the 60’s/70’s. I recall his pointing to the then virginal rearing edifice (owned by an insurance corporation) behind the Roma Street forum in Brisbane after the first Vietnam Moratorium in May 1970.

“Four workers died building that!” damning the varied iniquities of capitalism.

Another memory vivid from that day— later displayed prominently in the Self-Management Group’s broadsheet contesting the attacks from local Marxists—showed future social anarchist, Brian Laver, being restrained and gagged by union heavies as he tried to speak. Symbolic of the control exerted over his career and job opportunities in the years to come. Your enemy’s enemy is not your friend.

Two years back, on October the twenty-fifth, 2016, four young holidaymakers visiting the Gold Coast Dreamworld were killed when the Thunder River Rapids white water rafting ride went horribly wrong. There was outrage when the media-fronting chief executive was offered an estimated \$A 850,000 bonus two days after the horror. She hurriedly gave \$A 167,000 to the Australian Red Cross. Compassion in excelsis!

In recent days, from June 18 to June 29, 2018, the inquest has heard evidence from the two operators. Unbelievable. The 19 year old girl was her first day on that particular ride, received an hour or two’s instruction that morning. The emergency stop button was close but no one had told her what it did. An email a week earlier had told staff not to use this device but inform a senior supervisor. The more experienced operator has recounted 20 tasks and 16 hazard checks he needed to execute in under 60 seconds to start each ride. Neither had done first aid or CPR.

We now discover that six months earlier a company memo observed that profits were not rising so cutbacks in repairs and maintenance were ordered. The State Government Health and Safety Department agreed twice to deferments of inspections after 6 years despite the norm being every three.

My sister in Canberra knew the mother of two siblings who lost their life, my nieces went to school with them. Human error perhaps but riddled with the pressure and lack of process imposed by corporate lust.

In the past few years, two of my farming cousins have died. One from pancreatic cancer. He was revived a few years earlier by his nurse wife after ingesting dingo bait through his eyes. Clinically dead. His brother suffered from adult-onset leukaemia. Maybe the chemicals still supposedly critical to agriculture?

My home city, Ipswich, was the scene of many coal mines in the 19th.and 20th.centuries. It still bears the reputation of a less salubrious place to live despite the efforts of the former Mayor, once Australia's most popular, and his mantra 'Grow, grow!' A pity he is now charged with various counts of fraud, embezzlement and the like along with numerous other executives. Not good for the new image, that!

The Box Flat mining disaster in Ipswich claimed eighteen lives in 1972. Inadequate safety measures were indicated as contributing to the accident. More insidious is the re-emergence of Black Lung and silica dust disease and the lack of appropriate or enforced health regulations.

So all around us we see the signs of social neglect in a system careless of the vulnerable. When profit is the motive and competition is the ethic, these tragedies will be played out in so many places, in so many ways, in so many families. "The casualties of fallible humanity, human error", these will be the catchcries but this is the sob story of the privileged and god knows privilege seeps into the very bones of capitalism. Its blindness is manifest in neglect, irresponsibility, cruelties large and small.

Tony Sheather JUNE 2018

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