EUREKA STREET .com.au
Discerning humanity.

20 June 2008 Volume: 18 Issue: 12

Eureka Street is published fortnightly online, a minimum of 24 times per year by Eureka Street Magazine Pty Ltd

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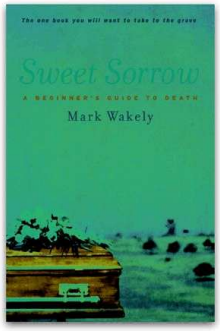
Volume 18 Issue: 12
20 June 2008

Living death

BOOK REVIEW

Richard White

Wakely, Mark. ***Sweet Sorrow: A Beginner's Guide to Death. Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, 2008. ISBN: 0-522-85513-X***



People should read this book. It is a very good read. But it is hard to describe or categorise.

The cover captions bring out some of its indefinable qualities. *Sweet Sorrow*is the title, and the theme that runs throughout — a poignant flavour, a perfume that suggests both presence and absence. It's an evocative sort of book, poetic in its capacity to suggest, invite, hint.

But this is a book about death, and 'the indefinable' seems appropriate here, too.

There is a tradition in Christian theology called apophatic — literally, 'away from the light'. It is a tradition that emphasises what we do not know about the great mysteries. Wakely has some of this in his treatment of death. He outlines a way of approaching this mystery — a map, if you like. But like the maps of old, with their 'here there be dragons', this account includes cautions — 'here there be questions'.

Wakely sets the tone with his personal odyssey. This is a book about his encounter with death.

This personal mood is reinforced with the story (fictitious) of Violet and her elderly father, Hamish. Scattered vignettes help us identify with the events of their life and death, and experience some of their 'sweet sorrow'.

Violet and Hamish are our companions as we follow the writer into the mundane and arcane elements of his own journey.

Wakely has his guides. Joan Didion, the author of *The year of Magical Thinking*, features prominently. Didion, a widow, writes that 'in time of trouble, I had been trained since childhood, read, learn, work it up, go to the literature. Information was control.'

This brings me to the subtitle, 'A Beginner's Guide To Death'.

Wakely confesses, 'I've always put death in the too hard basket'. There are psychological grounds for this approach, Freud assures us. But there are also traditions that have run counter to it: *The Tibetan Book of the Dead* and a 15th century text, *Ars Moriendi*, (*The Art of Dying*).

In *A Beginner's Guide To Death* Wakely is in sympathy with Didion's approach to 'read, learn, work it up, go to the literature'. He does something else. He goes to the people who know.

We are introduced to a palliative care physician, Frank Brennan. The companioning approach, recommended by the grief counsellor, Alan Wolfelt, is there in the anecdotal style.

There are conversations with staff at the morgue, detailed descriptions of autopsy and embalming procedures, encounters with funeral directors, and the wry observations of the journalist with his heart in the mix.

There are the reflections by Helen Ennis, curator of an exhibition of photos titled 'Reveries: Photography and Mortality', which included many photos of 'friends and family while they were dying and after they were dead'.

The final caption on the book cover is 'The one book you will want to take with you to the grave'. It claims to be a *vade mecum*, a companion piece, a reference and resource.

And, for all its detail, *Sweet Sorrow* has some of the qualities of poetry: imagination, phrases, stories and images, pictures of people and lives, as well as bodies and coffins. We are reminded that this is what death is about. The inescapable loveliness of human beings, Violet's conviction that 'my father was a good man'.

We would not grieve, and funerals would be otiose, if there were not this attachment that we form with one another. With the attachment can come a deep knowing and treasuring of another person. That person was real. That is why we grieve. That is our consolation.

Death is personal and inter-personal. Along with birth, it is the rite of passage. It is the focusing of the mind and heart that can make all thought impossible, as Phillip Larkin writes. Or, it is the sharp moment of loss when love spills from us as from wounds we have long forgotten.

Wakely's book about death is enlivening in its scope and in its particularity. It would fit nicely into the pocket of a shroud, if they had one.

Hmong refugees' scant Aussie hope

HUMAN RIGHTS

Joanna Maxwell

Chief Yong Tong Veng, head of the Hmong people at Petchabun camp, is desperate. 'We are hiding in this camp and no-one has come to help, the food is not enough. Do not send us back to Laos. Do not send us back to Laos. Please ask UNHCR [the United Nations Refugee agency] to help us. The Lao government shoot with big bullets in the jungle and children die. Do not send us back to Laos ...'

Some 8000 Hmong people live in this camp, 350 kilometres north of Bangkok, towards the Lao border. They are surrounded by barbed wire and under military guard. They have insufficient food, no schooling and limited ability to access Thai hospitals. Epidemics are a constant threat. They must wear identity cards marked 'in Thailand illegally'. They could be pitched back into Laos and the terrors it holds for them at any time.

Many of them fled from their villages in communist Laos, where they still fear persecution because their families sided with the USA in the Vietnam war.

If not for MÃ©decins Sans FrontiÃ¨res (MSF), the only aid agency at the camp, conditions would be much worse, says Nolwenn Conan, MSF field coordinator at Petchabun. 'If MSF was not here, there would be health scares, and problems with water, sanitation and food. The Thai government will not treat them at a hospital without us. We don't have enough money for food, charcoal and other things.'

The camp started in 2004 as a roadside tent village, but in mid-2007 the Thai military built a more permanent camp, where Colonel Tanu, Thai camp commander, says, 'It is easier to control things. Here they are more secure.'

Conditions may not be ideal, but at least the Hmong at Petchabun are 'secure'. But only just. And only for the moment.

Walk around the camp and inmates thrust sheets of paper at you, with stories and photos and pleas to UNHCR or the Australian government for help. Their fear and desperation are palpable, as they talk of disappearances, jungle fighting and cruelties in Laos. Many say they would rather die than be sent back to Laos.

Overwhelmingly, they want to resettle in a third country, and the United States and Australia top the list. Chief Yong Tong Veng is quite clear: 'We want to go to a new country. We want a place to live.'

The Thai government is not a party to the 1951 United nations Convention on the Status of Refugees and views the Hmong as illegal immigrants, not refugees. The Thais insist there is no role for UNHCR and that the Hmong will sooner or later be deported.

It is likely that not all inmates meet the UN criteria for refugee status, but as no internationally-recognised assessment has been done, it is hard to know.

According to spokesperson Kitty McKinsey, UNHCR wants to help. 'The Thai government has now completed what they call a screening and we can't really comment because we haven't seen the questions and don't know what the procedure's like. But our position all along is that it should live up to international standards.'

Most commentators have little faith in the Thai process. And so the Petchabun Hmong are in limbo. No third country is likely to take them in as refugees without verified screening.

Thailand is already deporting Hmong asylum seekers back to Laos, including 163 people in June 2007.

Twelve Petchabun Hmong returned to Laos at the end of February this year, 'voluntarily' according to the Thai government. Says McKinsey: 'We initially relied on assurances from the Thai Ministry of Foreign Affairs that the only people sent back to Laos were people who asked to go back. However, we soon began receiving reports that call into question whether everyone actually volunteered to go back, and that concerns us.'

The Lao government regards the Hmong as insurgents, but it insists that returnees won't be harmed. The Hmong don't believe this assurance and UNHCR, Human Rights Watch and other international agencies are also concerned.

Australia is keeping very quiet. Too quiet maybe. It has taken Hmong refugees in the past — the 2006 census shows 2189 Hmong living in Australia, and there are well-established community groups. But try to ask the ambassador in Thailand or the Department of Immigration and Citizenship (DIAC) why Australia isn't doing more now, and you don't get very far.

A DIAC spokesperson did confirm recently that the Australian government is aware of the issues and that 'a number' of permanent refugee visas have been granted to Hmong people in Thailand, though not in Petchabun. According to DIAC, they cannot get them out of Thailand as the Thai government won't grant 'exit permission'.

In a world faced with refugee crises on the scale of Dafur or Somalia, it is easy to overlook other asylum seeker populations altogether. And the Hmong are not being blown up, or sold into slavery, or dying of disease, or starving to death, at least not in Petchabun.

But they are locked up in limbo by the very people who hold their hopes in their hands. Chief Yong Tong Veng and his people are despairing. Their future looks bleak.

Aussie bloke's exotic love

FILM REVIEW

Tim Kroenert

***Unfinished Sky*: 91 minutes. Rated: M. Starring: William McInnes, Monic Hendrickx. Director: Peter Duncan**

Publicity material for *Unfinished Sky* — an Australian remake of the 1998 Dutch film *De Poolse Bruid*— spruiks a three-pronged approach. Purportedly, it's 'part social commentary, part dramatic thriller and part tender love story'.

Not all of the prongs are sharp — in fact, two of them are decidedly dull — but in this instance, it's a matter of 'one out of three ain't bad'. As a sweetly observed, cross-cultural love story, *Unfinished Sky* finds itself on solid ground.

That's primarily because of strong, internalised performances by its two leads. Their interactions are largely unspoken, because their characters don't speak the same language.

Queensland farmer John Woldring (McInnes) is the prototypical Aussie Bloke. His best friends and sole companions are his grotty ute and his blue heeler. For John, pissing off the back porch is a spiritual experience. His idea of romance consists of slow-dancing to Hunters and Collectors on the radio.

The usually fresh-faced McInnes has padded out and grimed up for the role, and is at times unrecognisable behind a face-full of grubby stubble. As the widower John, he broods, and chokes back grief and secrets long since gone bitter. He is a recluse, socially and emotionally.

When Tahmeena (Hendrickx), an illegal Afghani immigrant, stumbles up John's driveway, battered and frightened, his solitary routine is waylaid. She is, to him, exotic in every sense, despite bearing a striking resemblance to his late wife.

John nurses Tahmeena back to health, and as they learn to communicate using what small portions of language they share, affection, predictably, grows.

It's sweet and funny, though not exactly groundbreaking. And so, in an apparent, unnecessary attempt to elevate the story from being 'merely' enjoyable, the co-writers, Kees van der Hulst and director Peter Duncan, employ an ultimately limp social commentary.

It becomes evident that Tahmeena, having fled hardship in Afghanistan and journeyed to Australia in search of her estranged daughter, has been employed as a sex slave in a local

brothel. It was here that she received the injuries she bore upon her first encounter with John.

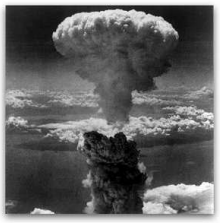
Such slavery and the exploitation of vulnerable immigrants are frightening and present realities in Australia, but in the context of this film they seem tokenistic. There's an inescapable sense that the themes are being exploited not from genuine concern, but in an attempt to lend the film social clout.

Certainly the villains of *Unfinished Sky* — Tahmeena's former captors, now pursuers — are drawn sketchily at best. Far from providing any kind of meaningful commentary, the film relies on these crude caricatures of evil that ultimately serve no purpose but to provide tepid tension and an incongruously violent final act.

Why Rudd commission won't stop the bomb

POLITICS

Binoy Kampmark



Kevin Rudd's new organisation to assess global nuclear disarmament — the Nuclear Non-Proliferations and Disarmament Commission — is typical of his recent, mixed report card on foreign policy initiatives: much potential with little clarity.

The occasion of the announcement was auspicious. It was taken in Kyoto, hours before he lay a wreath for the victims of Hiroshima. It gave Rudd a chance to pen a reflection in the guest book at the museum: 'Let the world resolve afresh from the ashes of this city — to work together for the common mission of peace for this Asia-Pacific century, and for a world where one day nuclear weapons are no more.'

Aside from the implicit belief that this century will belong to the Asia-Pacific region, Rudd's remark alludes to an abolitionist agenda for nuclear weapons. On that front, Rudd proposes this new organisation will be co-chaired by former Labor foreign minister Gareth Evans, with the intention of continuing the work of the defunct Canberra Commission, created by the Keating Government in 1995.

This has the flavour of sad repetition, re-inventing a wheel which never worked in the first place. What then can be made of this new organisation, should it ever reach some concrete form?

Rudd, for one, sees it as necessary to save the Nuclear Non-Proliferation treaty from the 'death of a thousand cuts'. But he is challenging the conventional NPT regime. And while that regime has not been a spectacular success, it has not been an abysmal failure either.

Rudd's proposal does little to edge countries such as Israel, Pakistan or India towards a regime of nuclear disarmament. Little is said, for instance, on the perennial need for more effective inspections.

The nuclear conversation is an imperative for modern global security, whatever realists or the morally jaundiced might think. But as always, the issue hinges on how the conversation is to take place.

There is an obvious difficulty with how Australian foreign policy will reconcile its vast natural deposits of uranium with the agenda of the commission. Ban the bomb, yet still sell uranium. The argument here is that uranium patrons will be checked for their anti-proliferation credentials — India, a non-signatory of the NPT, won't be on the list of

customers, nor, presumably, Pakistan or Israel. Russia, inexplicably, will continue to be a recipient.

Another, oft neglected problem is that if the object of this commission was realised — global eradication and abolition of nuclear weapons, ending Dr Strangelove doomsday scenarios that crowd the shelves of policy-makers — we would still be left with the wandering know-how, freelance scientists hawking their wares.

The greatest problem in that case is how to convince scientists otherwise engaged in military ventures to cease offering their services to foreign powers or non-state networks.

Abdul Qadeer Khan, considered the founder of Pakistan's nuclear program, was courted by various regimes from Tripoli to Pyongyang before being put under house arrest by General Pervez Musharraf. His network comprised 40 individuals, only a handful of whom were apprehended.

Its contacts within this proliferating web included companies in Germany, Italy and Spain, along with 'private actors' in countries from Singapore to Turkey. Supposedly crippled in 2004, the Khan network threatened a resumption of smuggling activities in 2007.

According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, some 429 nuclear trafficking cases were recorded between 2001—2005, while 10 per cent of them have involved criminal organisations.

Not every scientist has the mercenary eye of Khan, but preventing the brains behind projects from following their career wanderlust is the challenge in any post-nuclear framework. Nuclear smuggling, and the dilemma of non-state actors, remains a problem within a decentralised nuclear network.

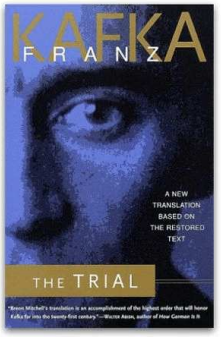
While removing the lethal armory of nuclear weapons from states such as Russia and the United States should be a priority, the more immediate expectation would be to curb networks profiting in the trade of illicit nuclear material.

Otherwise this committee threatens to go the same way the Canberra Commission did, its recommendations left unrecognised and inconsequential.

Another victim of bureaucratic sludge

BY THE WAY

Brian Matthews



'Someone must have told lies about Josef K. for without having done anything wrong he was arrested one fine morning.' So begins Franz Kafka's extraordinary novel, *The Trial*. The ordeal of Joseph K. has become embedded in western consciousness and has spawned an adjective: 'Kafkaesque'.

Things are Kafkaesque when you are caught in a labyrinth of unmanageable and inexplicable circumstances. Short of great personal catastrophe, this kind of experience occurs for most of us when we encounter some echelon of bureaucracy. It is then that we feel close to Josef K. and can re-live his desperation.

Well, someone must have it in for Brian M. for without having done anything wrong he was comprehensively buggered up one fine morning. As with Josef K., it was a complicated business, but let's start with the storm water pipes.

Months of storm waterless drought had concealed the fact that they had splintered. This should not have happened. I inherited this pipe system and was unaware that what lay beneath the surface was what Shane the plumber called 'cheapskate 90 ml shit' instead of the sturdy 100 ml.

When heavy rain finally fell, water bubbled up from the collapsed storm water plumbing forming a lake at the back door and beyond. Foreseeing that I would have neither the time nor the equipment — like a casual jack hammer, for instance — to deal with another 50 metres of disaster, I conceded and called Shane.

A mere five days after he incredulously inspected the site, two of his workers, Jake and Dave, turned up to start their investigations. It rained, however — the trenches filled with water and they had to delay for another couple of days.

When, after three days, there was still too much water around to locate the damage, they went back to base to get a sludge pump. This took only a day and a half ...

Meanwhile, I had my own sludge to contend with, and no pump. At about the time I first approached Shane with my water problems, I had initiated an uncharacteristically intense series of encounters with the bureaucracy. These involved the renewal of my venerable and expiring Victorian Driving Licence with a South Australian equivalent, a request for a copy of

my birth certificate, and a complicated application to a government agency.

These communications were accompanied by a battery of documentary proofs — photo ID, paid-up bills, bank statements, my Flinders University Library Card with a photo of Che Guevara (well, me actually, but unrecognisably me), and so on.

Various of these documents had to be certified and to accomplish this I took them to the local police station where, finding not a gendarme in sight, I was confronted by a stern-looking woman whom I took to be the cleaner but who revealed that she was a JP.

Reproving me roundly for not having already photocopied my material, she vigorously stamped and illegibly signed the documents, and I gratefully posted everything off.

On the morning that Jake and Dave finally wheeled in the sludge pump, I rang Births Deaths and Marriages to ask about the four-week hiatus since I'd sent in my details, and learned from a man who appeared to be operating just north of induced coma that his department did not accept certification by JPs.

Within the same hour, I received a letter from the government agency rejecting my application because there was no birth certificate (I'd said it was on its way) and another letter, from the Registrar of Motor Vehicles, reporting that I had not included the requisite documents.

I sprang to the phone, knowing that I had absolutely indubitably included the requisite bloody documents. A pleasant, unflustered and robotic female voice told me how valuable I was and that I was sixth in the queue.

When, quite a long time later, she told me I was third in the queue, there was a thunderous knock on the back door. Jake, gumbooted and mudstreaked wanted me to 'take a look at this if you've got a minute'. With the phone at my ear, I gestured I'd be along soon.

When I was second in the queue — amazing how sexy her voice became with each promotion — I saw through the kitchen window Jake and Dave pacing up and down, looking impatient, so I ended the call.

'Some silly bugger's put a third pipe under these two,' Jake said, vibrant with disbelief. 'What about we replace the whole lot with 100 ml?' I left them to it and rang the sexy woman. I was seventh in the queue but my call was important to them. I gave up.

What I plan to do is go back to the police station, find that JP and get her to certify me. Move over Josef K., another victim's coming in.

Watching the watchdogs

POLITICS

Moira Rayner

'Rather ten devils to check one another than one mandarin with absolute power.' (The Tiananmen declaration, 2 June 1989)

Ah, but how to tame those devils? Public life is a struggle for power, profile and privilege, yet like Diogenes we seek the honest man who will end all corruption. Today we are given government-begotten institutions vested with 'standing royal commission' powers. That they can't keep the executive, even the police, in check, and that power is toxic to some working in them, should by now be evident.

These commissions put on highly satisfactory shows. WA's Corruption and Crime Commission did a beautiful job on non-public servant/now lobbyist Brian Burke and his business partner in public hearings in 2007, and on the head of that state's Health Department earlier this year.

Victoria's Office of Police Integrity has been holding public inquiries in which some police, who denied making suspect phone calls (or calls to suspects) on the one day, were exposed making such calls in covert telephone taps on the next. Squirming is such sweet satisfaction.

Yet the displays do not necessarily end well. WA's ex-health chief Neal Fong — who supposedly misled his powerful Minister by denying he had had contact with Mr Burke, when in fact he had illegally told Burke about a CCC enquiry affecting him — is not to be prosecuted. This is, according to WA Director of Public Prosecutions Robert Cock, because Fong has suffered enough in being forced to resign his $600,000 position.

Other public servants condemned by the CCC were later cleared of wrongdoing by tribunals or the CCC's Parliamentary Inspector, who was scathing about the quality, bias and adequacy of the CCC investigation. McCusker QC was then scourged by the CCC for 'exceeding' his powers in reinvestigating its investigation — in other words, for making it accountable.

In NSW, a highly public Royal Commission exposed corruption, bribery and extortion over more than two years. It led to an increased role for a Police Integrity Commission as well as the Independent Commission Against Corruption. Yet Senior Inspector Mark Standen (pictured) of the NSW Crime Commission, an organised crime detection agency independent of the police, moulders in strict security charged with massive complicity in a conspiracy to import illegal drugs.

For all those Victorian OPI hearings, there yet remains a dark underbelly of police officers

with personal connections with organised crime and shady mates; making careful calls, hints and discretionary interventions. Why assume that the answer is another anti-corruption body?

Two observations should be made. The first is about our naÃ¯vetÃ© in placing trust in standing royal commissions. The Star Chamber worked efficiently, too.

The second is that public, authoritative and even judicial decision-making stands to be affected by our human need to externalise 'evil'.

Anti-corruption and crime prevention agencies employ not only people who work in policing, intelligence and investigations, but also police and government agencies with investigative powers. Lawyers and former judges, too. They tend to have mixed socially as well as professionally.

In a righteous environment, to be seen to breach conventions of propriety or authority, a man or woman has to become 'other'. It is a lot easier to see wrongdoing of one who does not share a bond with the observer.

It is infinitely harder to detect in those with whom we have shared a common purpose — for example, police and anti-corruption investigators conducting joint operations into organised crime who are, at the same time, supposed to be alert to 'corrupt conduct' or misconduct in the other. Friendships and relationships blur lines of sight, perception and sensitivity. It's human nature.

We are also discouragingly quick to assume that a public excoriation during an investigative hearing or media flurry is equivalent to real guilt. Let us not assume that Mark Standen is, for example, guilty of any crime. It is a matter for the criminal law to prove beyond reasonable doubt, having displaced a presumption of innocence.

Who of us was not shocked about the apparent guilt of Dr Haneef? And yet it was not so, and often is not so, and even a chief of police or a DPP may, with a fairy dusting of enormous powers (such as anti-terrorism and organised crime laws), become a political player.

The truth lies where it ought. Even the pure make decisions based on the allegations of powerful men. Mark Standen had a colleague dismissed after 'informally' accusing him of tipping off crims. A fall may be triggered by quiet conversations, nods and understandings among apparently good, sound men.

We need good laws and judges to make sure our governors and their institutions do not hog power. Anti-corruption, police integrity and organised-crime agencies are just as vulnerable as any other to infiltration, concealment and a bullying culture in which intimidation and 'noble cause' corruption can grow.

A representative democracy has to protect individual rights. There will always be tensions between those rights and the organisational needs of government. Until there is some

internalisation of these principles in those who rule us, watchdogs continue to be essential. But it is impossible to govern by royal commission.

Some anti-corruption watchdogs work with government to develop guidelines and training to make the principles of ethical behaviour integral to the working environment. This is to be praised. Yet there is a fine line to be drawn between cooperating with bureaucracies and being co-opted by them.

For the watchdogs themselves there is a delicate balance to be struck. There is a difference between retaining the integrity of the office and acting in a high-handed way. WA's CCC, for example, has claimed to be immune from public oversight of its investigations. Yet its acts can ruin reputations and lives.

Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Ultimately, we the people.

While we're still young and beautiful

POETRY

Jeff Klooger

Young And Beautiful

Our short history
and all the interminable hours since last night
have educated us. We're the lucky ones,
fashionably thin and functionally eloquent,
we get by. Our parents — so diligent, so astute,
so rich we can no longer hope to know
the simple satisfaction of hardship, amuse ourselves
with subtler privations, pricking our thumbs
on death's sharp edges, complaining.
Oblivion loves us, knows us like
a confidante. We belong together, share
all the best moments of our lives, flat out
or dancing until daybreak, phosphorescing
within and without. Chemicals burn
our skin and eyes, but whatever does not heal
can be replaced, refurbished. Miracles happen almost
every day, and money, like me and you, wants
to be wasted. When it hardly matters
we'll meet each other falling down
or swinging aimlessly, stumbling from one glorious
disaster to the next. Surely this is the way to live

if not to die, as giddy as a circus,

as calculated as a Ferris wheel.

If wisdom eludes us, bliss explodes

like a beer glass against your temple,

bleeding just a home-made cure

for youthful exuberance. — Jesus! This could go on

for years, until something sticky

finally slows us down, and we creep,

sooner or later, into a universal middle age

painlessly resigned and dutifully undistinguished.

Don't let it happen to us! Don't let it happen yet, or soon!

Don't let it happen while the lights still flash

and sear, while the music pumps its fists,

while we're still young and beautiful

and hungry for that next sweet fix

to smooth our wrinkles and fill our hollows

and let us sleep throughout another day.

Uncle Jeff

I am an uncle twice, the first time

to a sweet, young boy, now nine,

who, when asked what he might be when he grows up

replied 'I want to be like Jesus.'

I bit my tongue, fought down

those grown-up cynic's jibes.

('You mean you want to walk on water,

raise the dead, be crucified

for other people's faults?') I smiled,

tried not to laugh, and worried

where such faith might take him.

The second child is two, a girl, and she

adores me — I can't say why.

When she phones, her grandmother

can barely speak two words

before she interrupts, 'Where's Uncle Jeff?

Where's Uncle Jeff?' When she is here

we play together, hide and seek.

She tells me where to hide, then goes away

to count, returning to find me just where

I'd been put. We scream with mock surprise

and real delight. At the playground

we cook up fish and chips in the dirt,

march up the hill together

then back down again, play catch

so close we almost hand each other the ball.

I try not to play favourites, spread myself

between them like an uncle should.

It's hard. Such joy, such fun, such guileless love
makes an ageing bachelor feel

he might be worth preserving after all.

My nephew is a mystery, a riddle

to be probed and solved, a promise

I will try to nurture as I might.

My niece is pure delight, a reason

to forgive myself all faults, a licence

to be young again, a blessing

neither looked for nor expected.

Rudd in rut over national reforms

POLITICS

Bill Calcutt


ABC News
Rudd flags tax reform

The appearance in recent weeks of several media reports critical of the Prime Minister's demanding work ethic and skeptical of the new government's policy agenda may reflect the residual influence of attitudes prevalent during the Howard era.

The electorate has given the Rudd Government a clear mandate for major national reform. The government has a unique opportunity to capitalise on a high level of community goodwill, and widespread expectations for positive change.

However, aspects of the political environment that evolved during the Howard era have the potential to thwart reforms, and will need to be overcome if the government is to successfully advance a progressive agenda.

The last years of the Howard era were typified by reactive short-term politics, adversarial confrontation, polarisation and a resistance to transparency. In the end the level of cynicism within the community was high, and the integrity of publicly elected representatives was diminished.

The Howard era saw an unprecedented concentration of power and political authority at the apex of government. The politics of personality and the intense focus on key individuals can undoubtedly have great political benefits in terms of maintaining control and communicating a single message. But in a complex and rapidly evolving world the level of pressure on an individual to perform flawlessly is unrealistic and ultimately unsustainable.

Apart from being incompatible with democratic principles and proper checks and balances, the centralisation of authority is invariably at the cost of organisational growth and modernisation, capacity-building and succession.

There are more viable, sustainable and contemporary models of political authority than the present Australian focus on relentlessly undermining individuals. Labor has expressed a desire to move beyond a rancorous political environment to place greater emphasis on shared goals and the development of collaborative solutions.

The government has a unique opportunity to engender an ongoing dialogue about the sorts of ideals, values, principles and practices that underpin an effective and contemporary democracy and an inclusive society.

In addition to redefining the broader political and policy context, the Prime Minister needs

to devolve authority (and accountability) to a wide range of talented representatives, in particular ministers, senior public service representatives and co-opted partners in the public and private sectors.

The development of independent and diverse perspectives can be a virtue and central to transparent evidence-based decision making. The Prime Minister is then free to play a genuine leadership role as a facilitator and catalyst to inspire the efforts of others, not as the initiator and the focus of all attention.

One of the other beneficiaries of the concentration of power during the Howard era was the media. An authority figure needs direct access to the electorate through the media. As the arbiter of what is reported and how, the media grew to play a powerful role in both shaping public opinion and exerting pressure on the Government to modify decisions.

The change of Government and the new political dynamics have necessitated some adjustments in the role and expectations of the media. This was inevitable given the media's diminished influence on, and unfamiliarity with, those who had assumed power. The absence of sensational crises and the constant intrigue and speculation that surrounded the final period of the Howard era may make generating 'interesting' stories more difficult.

The media's negative response to the 2020 Summit suggests a degree of resentment and frustration at being effectively marginalised in a new national dialogue. The danger for a reforming Government is that a cynical and contemptuous media struggling for relevance will seek to influence the community's perceptions of the Government's competence and motivation through constant criticism, dissipating existing support and goodwill and making each new policy initiative a Herculean task.

A possible response to the negative influence of the media is to broaden and diversify Government channels of communication with the community, and to continue to build a broader inclusive national agenda.

Thousands of citizens took the time to make detailed online submissions on important national issues prior to the 2020 Summit, and there is no reason why this sort of opportunity/facility should not be established and expanded as a permanent and direct conduit from the community to the Government.

The nuclear terror of Bush 'negligence' policy

POLITICS

Marko Beljac

It was not widely reported, but in February the Bush Administration enacted what may turn out to be one of the most significant policy decisions it has made in response to 9/11. President Bush signed new presidential guidance that provides an entirely new mission for US nuclear forces. The White House has effectively developed a new policy on the deterrence of nuclear terrorism.

The policy was announced in a little-noted closed speech given by Stephen Hadley, President Bush's national security adviser, at Stanford University. He stated that, 'as part of this strategy to combat nuclear terrorism, the President has approved a new declaratory policy to help deter terrorists from using weapons of mass destruction against the United States, our friends, and allies'.

He also stated that, 'as many of you know, the United States has made clear for many years that it reserves the right to respond with overwhelming force to the use of weapons of mass destruction against the United States, our people, our forces and our friends and allies'. The phrase 'overwhelming force' has always been understood to refer to the employment of nuclear weapons.

The Bush Administration has seemingly developed a far-reaching policy that is partly designed to deter the acquisition of fissile material by terrorists. It would seek to deter al Qaeda indirectly by deterring state actors from providing assistance, such as knowingly transferring fissile material to terrorists.

But more may be at play here. The United States may actually have developed a 'negligence doctrine' for the deterrence of nuclear terrorism. As former Bush Administration official Elbridge Colby observed of the new policy, 'any and all thinking of participation, complicity, or negligence in the face of a catastrophic attack against the United States or its allies should have reason to worry about the retaliation that would follow'.

If through nuclear forensics the fissile material used in a nuclear terrorist attack were attributed to a Russian or Pakistani facility, the United States may well respond, under the new policy, by striking Russia or Pakistan using nuclear weapons. This would be a proportionate attack, most likely employing low-yield B61-11 nuclear weapons.

A negligence doctrine would involve striking even if the fissile materials were stolen, not just knowingly leaked, from one of their facilities on grounds that they were 'negligent' in

their handling of fissile materials.

Most analysts argue that should fissile material be stolen and used to fuel an improvised bomb it would most likely come from a Russian facility. The central aspect of any deterrence posture is credibility — advocates of a negligence doctrine argue that this type of deterrence would be credible because the United States has, or will soon have, a nuclear first strike capability against Russia.

This is extremely wishful thinking. By no means can the US be said to have a first strike capability. In fact, a negligence doctrine increases the chance of what should properly be regarded as the leading security threat facing the world, namely inadvertent nuclear war.

Imagine if a nuclear weapon was detonated in New York that employed fissile material attributed to a Russian nuclear facility, and that, immediately thereafter, the US decided to adhere to a negligence policy and strike back with a limited low yield nuclear strike.

Russia would likely respond in kind. This would set off a chain reaction leading, at best, to limited and controlled exchanges or, at worst, to an all out exchange.

Quite literally, the Bush Administration may have handed al Qaeda the keys to Armageddon.

The negligence doctrine quite clearly violates the most elementary principles of natural justice. It is clear that the civilian population of, say, Pakistan would in no way be liable for negligence. If implemented — and policies such as this can create 'commitment traps' — the negligence doctrine will properly be taken as a monumental act of injustice throughout the Islamic world, which would support al Qaeda's political objectives.

In the so-called 'war on terror' there is more to be gained through consideration of issues such as Middle East policy and inter-cultural and religious dialogue than there is in military posturing.

Consumer confidence can't be bought

EDITORIAL

Andrew Hamilton

The latest Westpac-Melbourne Institute index of consumer sentiment was published last week. It showed a continuing drop in confidence. Australians' confidence in the economy has declined to the lowest level for 16 years, particularly among the more wealthy. Westpac chief economist Mr Bill Evans suggested the most recent fall was due to higher petrol price and to rising inflation.

Although to the amateur, forecasting future trends on the basis of consumer confidence may seem as arcane as the Roman practice of examining bird entrails, a little reflection suggests why confidence matters.

If we are gloomy about the future of the economy we are likely to spend less. If we spend less, shops will sell less and factories will make less. If they sell and make less, they will earn less and need fewer workers. All that may mean less desire to borrow money and so lower interest rates.

But of course on each scale of this economic snake, peoples' lives change. Dismissed employees find it hard to get new jobs and to pay mortgages. Anxiety and pressure rise and, as we deal with them inappropriately, family harmony and community cohesion are also made more precarious.

So confidence matters to people as well as to economists. Even if governments can't do much about the price of petrol or the cost of borrowing money, they still talk up the economy and try to encourage confidence. Fairly ineffectively, it must be said. Governments are seen as deserving scapegoats, not as the cause of economic troubles.

The human hardship associated with economic difficulties points to the need, both in individuals and in society, for a deeper source of confidence. We need to trust that, come what may, we will survive and that what matters more deeply to us can be maintained even in economic struggle. This confidence goes deeper than economic good times.

Governments can do a little to foster this confidence. It helps us be confident if we know that when all else falls apart there is a network of social security that would enable us, at least inadequately, to feed ourselves and find shelter and medical care for our family.

Governments can also enable more important things. For people who live in destitution in third world cities, any deeper confidence they may have to face the day comes from their trust

in the resources of their indigent communities. If people have something, they are willing to share it with another in desperate need. If children need a temporary home, someone will take them in. Confidence builds on local networks.

In Australia this was revealed in the Community Adversity and Resilience Report. It showed that poverty and disadvantage were concentrated in certain postcodes. But in these suburbs the sense and reality of being connected were higher than in more affluent suburbs. People's source of confidence lay in other people and in local groups.

This suggests that the deeper confidence that blesses a nation can be fostered by governments consulting with and working through community groups. The idol of the strong, competitive economic individual is very brittle. When it shatters, confidence also fragments.

We also grow in confidence if we feel proud of our society and nation. Governments can encourage that pride by acting decently and steadily and by speaking in a way that endorses these values.

Of course, governments find themselves in a bind here. We have seen that they gain short term advantage by acting indecently, particularly by harsh rhetoric and arbitrary laws directed against those seen as different, like asylum seekers, Muslims and so on. By acting decently, they often incur the wrath of the popular media whose lust for blood is always profitable.

But the more our angers and fears are mirrored in public rhetoric and legislation, the more our anxiety grows. Steady and decent public policies in which we can take pride actually build confidence.

High economic confidence is quite useful. High human confidence is not only useful. It is also valuable.

Democratic Indonesia's lesson for Australia

MULTICULTURALISM

Saeed Saeed

I recently had the privilege of celebrating the key Buddhist festival of Waisak by joining thousands of Buddhist worshippers in a procession towards the historic Borobudur Temple in Indonesia's Central Java province.

What struck me as I followed the two-kilometre route through small dilapidated villages was the sea of Indonesian Muslims, Christians and Hindus lining up on both sides of dirt roads to pay their respect to their minute Buddhist population.

This is the spirit of Pancesila, the philosophy at the heart of Indonesian society that emphasises equality and mutual respect. It is the Indonesian Bill of Rights and Human Rights Charter all rolled into one and has taken new found significance since the fall of Suharto's authoritarian regime and the rise of the terrorist group Jamiah Islamiah.

Not that we Aussies know or particularly care about this, unless you are Kevin Rudd — visiting Indonesia today — or part of the political and diplomatic establishment.

In a recent report titled 'Seeing Indonesia as a normal country', the influential Australian Strategic Policy Unit lamented the 'sharp disjuncture' existing between political leaders' unprecedented cooperation and the ignorance that continues to fester between average Australians and our South Eastern Asian neighbours.

This disparity is glaringly reflected in a 2006 Lowy poll stating most Australians don't even know that Indonesia is a democracy.

So how to counter this worrying development? Both governments began designing a series of exchange programs which attempt to break the ice on a local level through the use of educational scholarships, sports and cultural exchange.

As a recent alumnus of the latter, I spent two weeks travelling through this vast country meeting Indonesians from all walks of life — from politicians and scholars to students and families. I was overwhelmed by ordinary Indonesians' deep desire to have a dialogue with Australians that has long been restricted by oceans and privilege.

Australians often sneer at multi-faith dialogue initiatives as being elitist chinwags hollow of practical outcomes, but Indonesians' inclusive form continues to dampen potential flash points in religiously diverse communities. The result of this is a thriving democracy that should be

viewed as a beacon for the Muslim world and which can offer expert advice to advanced countries striving for social cohesion.

While in these shores the mere opening of a religious school or an ignorant comment can spark confrontations between self-labelled Muslim and Christian leaders, Indonesian society has adopted a live-and-let-live ethos that has continued unabated for centuries.

Indonesia's labelling as a basket case of corruption and terrorism denies the significant strides the country has taken since its democratic reformation a decade ago. The fact it survived its historic bloodshed and iron fisted rule without falling apart is the miracle of the Indonesian story.

I found races of this in the Indonesian Centre for Islam and Pluralism, a Jakarta based NGO that specialises in conflict resolution among communities and working with Islamic boarding schools in preaching a message of an inclusive Islam.

It is also in the ingenuity of Sekolah Citra Alam, an award winning kindergarten that is a leading innovator in the field of environmental education, where children of all faiths are taught planting techniques and environmental conservation at the age of three.

And it is in the plethora of youth magazines self-published by socially conscious students who don't require a government summit to be reminded of their democratic right to be politically active.

The Indonesians I met haven't forgotten the kindness Aussies have shown in the aftermath of the harrowing 2004 tsunami. But what is most required now is an influx of social capital. Exchange programs should continue looking beyond the political and educational bubble to include the unsung heroes of everyday society such as welfare workers, teachers, nurses, local police and small business owners.

The resulting exchange of experiences and practical ideas between normal Australians and Indonesians will immeasurably empower both countries in combating the growing tide of ignorance. It could also do as much to enrich this vital strategic alliance as the deep symbolism and ceremony of a head of state visit.

Travelogue of Indonesian Islam

BOOK REVIEW

Shahram Akbarzadeh

Dhume, Sadanand: *My Friend the Fanatic, Travels with an Indonesian Islamist.* Melbourne, Text Publishing, 2008

News from Indonesia has been dominated by reports of bombings and growing Islamic militancy. This month the Defenders of Islam were in the news again, this time not for attacking bars and nightclubs, but for attacking a Muslim sect which they accuse of apostasy.

It sounds like Indonesia is on the same slippery slope as the rest of the Muslim world, with Islamic zealots gaining the upper hand in society and pushing it toward intolerance.

A large body of literature has emerged on the study of Indonesia's diverse religious make-up and the organic relationship between Islam and pre-Islamic traditions which set it apart from the rest of the Muslim world. While most Muslim societies are dominated by Islam, with all aspects of pre-Islamic traditions either purged or totally absorbed beyond recognition, Indonesia continues to experience a multiplicity of faiths and traditions.

Most observers saw this multiplicity as the best guarantee against Islamic radicalism. The Bali bombings shattered that belief.

The starting point for Sadanand Dhume in *My Friend the Fanatic*is the question: What is happening to Indonesia, and why? As a trained journalist, Dhume falls on his strength of constructing narratives and relies on his talent to recount the stories of the people he interviews.

His sources include preachers, academics, politicians and pop stars. His most intriguing source is a self-prescribed Islamist Herry Nurdi, who takes Dhume on a journey around Indonesia to meet and talk to a range of Islamic activists. This is the most exciting aspect of the book, offering Dhume access to the political and ideological thinking of Islamists.

The picture that emerges is worrying. Dhume finds Indonesian Islamist thinking to be dominated by conspiracy theories, grossly simplistic and deeply distrustful of the 'West'.

For example, Dhume meets with Abdul-Rahim, Abu Bakar Ba'asyir's 26-year-old son, who argues that Muslims are not free in the United Kingdom. Later Herry tells Dhume how an

entire echelon of the Indonesia army has been filled with Christians, and how President Suharto was toppled because of American concerns regarding his links with Islam.

Perhaps one of the more interesting aspects of Islamist thinking, as Dhume discovers, is that it is heavily influenced by parochial prejudices and concerns while simultaneously being global in its horizon. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the mobilisation of Muslim volunteers to engage in jihad had an important role in linking Indonesian Muslims with the politics of Islam in the Middle East.

This is not a subject for Dhume to explore. But he does refer to it in his recount of numerous conversations. In one case, Herry confides in Dhume that his second wife will have to be Jordanian because that would give him access to Palestine.

But it would be wrong to assume that Indonesia's political landscape is dominated by global jihadists. That is certainly not the message in this book, even if the epilogue paints a rather pessimistic picture. Years of reporting from Indonesia made Dhume alert to the tapestry of rich cultural traditions which continue to inform social and communal practices.

Writing in Yogykarta, Dhume tells of an ancient Hindu festival celebrating the Queen of the South Seas. He recounts a conversation with a local Muslim woman who appears to be in two minds about the festival. On the one hand it feels wrong for her to be affiliated with this pre-Islamic event, while on the other hand, she seems happy to adopt some of its aspects.

She assures Dhume that a pawang, or a paranormal shaman, would stop the rain to allow the festivities to proceed. The obvious contradiction of her beliefs seems lost to her.

Dhume has managed to capture the complexity of Indonesian society and produce an easy-to-read travelogue. This may not be a book for experts, but it is good value for those with an interest in how our northern neighbours cope with the growing politicisation of Islam.

Haunted by the ghosts of SIEV-X

FILM REVIEW

Rochelle Siemienowicz

***Hope*: 104 minutes. Rated: M. Director: Steve Thomas**

In October 2001, a people-smuggling boat sank on its way from Indonesia to Australia. 353 people died, many of them women and children who were trying to join their husbands and fathers already here on temporary protection visas.

This tragedy barely surfaced in our media, for these were the overheated days of post 9/11, and Australians were angrily arguing about another maritime accident, known as the 'children overboard incident'. This film seeks to remedy this ignorance, by telling the story of the SIEV-X (Suspected Illegal Entry Vessel 'Unknown') through the account of one its survivors, Amal Basry, whose name means 'Hope' in her native language.

With her hair covered in a dark scarf, this middle-aged woman looks very ordinary — like any other suburban grandmother of Middle-Eastern descent. But when Amal speaks she has a voice that demands to be heard, and a story that is unforgettable.

After various brothers and brothers-in-law were killed and tortured under Saddam Hussein's regime, Amal and her family decided they had to leave Iraq. They travelled to Iran, then Indonesia. Finally, she and her youngest son boarded a leaky boat to Australia, where they hoped to be reunited with Amal's husband, who had just been released from the Woomera detention centre.

When the boat sank, Amal spent 22 hours in the water, clinging to the body of a dead woman to stay afloat, and fearing that she'd lost her son forever.

A striking feature of the film is the inclusion of Kate Durham's paintings depicting the 353 people who died on the SIEV-X. Using only her imagination of the undocumented events, refugee activist and artist Durham has created eerily beautiful portraits of wide-eyed children and women floating and disappearing into the murky waters. Amal, who is a friend of Durham's, expresses amazement at the way these pictures reflect her own terrible memories.

There are many questions that remain about the Australian government's knowledge of that boat in our heavily patrolled seas — the film implicitly suggests that a parliamentary inquiry is essential.

But *Hope* is really about Amal, and the hardships she encounters once she is rescued from

those dark waters. Making a life in a new country is hard, especially on a temporary protection visa that precludes overseas travel to see loved ones. And then there is the isolation, the poverty, the haunting ghosts of children drowned, and finally, as if she hasn't suffered enough, breast cancer.

For all the tragedy it contains, the film is not, ultimately, a depressing one. But it does have its flaws. Directed by Steve Thomas (*Welcome to Woomera*) and co-produced by Sue Brooks (*Japanese Story*), *Hope* is a low budget film in need of a stricter edit.

What shines through, however, is Amal's wonderful courageous spirit, and her refusal to be silent about the many innocent people who died on that dreadful October night. It's an important and inspiring reminder of the journeys people make to live in our 'Paradise'.

Rudd and the sin of overwork

SPIRITUALITY

Andrew Hamilton


theage.com.au
THE AGE
Kevin's way: burning the oil at midnight, toiling at dawn
Michelle Grattan
May 31, 2008
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"FRANKLY, I do believe in burning the midnight oil", Kevin Rudd declared yesterday, in face of ever-louder groans from weary public servants. The trouble is, he also lights the burner before dawn. As one public service talkback caller told ABC radio yesterday, "Fair go. If you are on board early in the day, don't expect them to be there late at night too."
"I believe that the Australian community at large expect all of us to work really hard." - Kevin Rudd
Photo: Erin Jonasson

Many people thought Kevin Rudd rash when he demanded that public servants work day and night. But should the public servants obey him? There are good grounds for saying that overworking is morally unjustifiable. In old-fashioned Catholic terms it may be a sin.

It is certainly not an old-fashioned Catholic sin. Older Catholic moralists were more perturbed by sloth than excessive work. When they responded to the Industrial Revolution, they diagnosed the problem as exploitation, not overwork. Employers forced workers to spend long hours in hard manual work under harsh conditions.

Moralists also defined sin in terms of actions and not of habitual states. To stay away from work all day was an action that was easy to categorise as a sin. To stay up all night working was more slippery.

In fact the whole idea of overworking seems slippery. What one culture considers excessive, another considers normal.

Work, too, has changed. The harm suffered after spending long hours in front of a computer is of a different kind from that resulting from long shifts digging coal. Overwork differs for different cultures and individuals.

I'll leave aside the overwork of low-paid workers, which often involves exploitation under lax regulations, and try out a loose definition of overwork that fits white-collar workers. It is to invest disproportionate time and concentration on what you consider to be work.

This definition brings together two defining qualities of intellectual work — the time we spend on it and the quality of attention that it demands. The definition also recognises that what one person would see as work, another would conceive of as play.

What makes overwork morally unjustifiable is that the time and attention we give to it is disproportionate. Our way of working should be measured by the conditions we need in order to flourish as human beings.

If the way in which we work does not offer us space to nurture the significant relationships in our lives, to explore our other gifts, to contribute to our communities, and to reflect on the meaning and direction of our lives, we are likely to be overworking.

Of course some work, for example crafts and gardening, offers space to nurture some

aspects of our humanity.

The metaphor of space brings together the time and the focus we need to bring to the variety of relationships and commitments that shape our humanity. Overwork crimps our space in a way that becomes habitual and self-destructive.

Overwork is morally unjustifiable because it makes instrumental goals central, and fails to respect deeper human values. The security, affluence, status, approval or reputation that we seek can be helpful means to develop relationships, allow us to continue learning and make a difference to others' lives. But in overworking we make these things goals, and so erode our humanity.

Of course to speak of overwork as morally unjustifiable can burden with guilt people who have no choice but to overwork. But the importance of moral reflection is to remind ourselves that we do have a choice. Certainly if we choose not to overwork we incur short-term losses for long-term and perhaps ethereal gains. That is the nature of moral choice.

When we renounce socially endorsed sins like overwork, the losses seem heavier. The culture of many workplaces encourages workers to internalise and idealise the neglect of their human dignity involved in overwork. They find it hard, a sign of failure, to leave the abusive environment.

So those who encourage an environment that makes overwork seem normal and demand that their employees fit in to it carry a heavier moral responsibility.

Since in popular myth the public service is often seen as a sheltered workshop for bludgers, Mr Rudd won some sympathy for demanding heroic work practices. The sympathy was misplaced. Overwork is particularly dangerous in the public service because public servants must consider the human dignity of those affected by the regulations they frame. They cannot reliably do this if they or their masters regard as expendable respect for their own human dignity. A culture of overwork is a public disservice.

If overwork is a sin, Mr Rudd has no business promoting it.

The long, hairy legs of political disillusionment

CREATIVE NON-FICTION

Roger Trowbridge

Among assorted memorabilia on top of my wardrobe is a cap. I think you would call the colour forage green. The cap has a peak, and above the peak is a red, five-point, metal star. My brother brought it back from China — as worn by members of the Chinese armed forces, he said — some time in the early 1980s. We knew them as 'the Red Army', without any understanding of the politics.

I might not have known about Chinese politics, but I knew very well what I was doing when deciding to wear that hat to work. It suited me, at the time, to be seen as a 'leftie', and a green hat with a red star would leave little room for political ambiguity. So in my early days on university staff I donned the cap every morning, wound a scarf around my neck, and set off to my lecturing in a topless Mini Moke.

'Smug', I think, best describes this particular period of my political life. Smug and naÃ¯ve. But alas, one is always found out by smugness. I think this is because to be smug is to have one's nose in the air. There is, with smugness, no feeling of compulsion to keep one's eye on the ball, and so tripping up — to pursue a tangle of metaphors — will almost certainly follow. Just deserts seem to work with smugness.

My tripping up occurred one cold, autumn morning. I donned the cap and scarf and set off in peak hour traffic. At about 25 minutes in, and still some distance to travel, the meandering line of commuters inevitably ground to a near stand-still, and crawled and grumbled its way through several sets of traffic lights before the final open stretch to campus. There was nothing for it but to wait. I sat and rehearsed a lecture, or watched others watching me. Maybe they were wondering about my cap ...

In the next instant I became acutely aware of three things in rapid succession. First, people in an adjacent car were pointing at me and to one another, animated in conversation behind their closed window. Second, I caught sight of some wisps of hair blowing in the wind under the peak of my cap. And third, I realised there was no wind and that I had no hair to blow in the first place.

All this awareness came together in the sudden realisation that what appeared to my first glance as wisps of hair were in fact the legs of a creature — a large creature — that was attempting to step off the peak of my cap. Although desperately hoping otherwise I felt burdened by the conviction that this creature was an over-dimensional huntsman spider.

Isopeda Isopedella.

I do not like spiders. I can trace this loathing back to the days of my childhood when mother and I, in father's long absences, would lay siege with mop and broom to 'tarantulas' that had crept in during the night and clung, spread-legged, on the cornice. The hapless spider most often ran down the handle to screams from mother and me, or leaped from the cornice to land at our feet.

It was on the basis of this deep loathing that my body sprang to action on the day of my undoing. I swiped at the cap with all my might, and sent it spinning to the farthest corner of the tiny cabin. My last glimpse of the spider — a big and fat specimen — was of its hasty retreat to safety up behind the dashboard.

Later, I sat for a long time in the university car park, the forage green cap with the Red Army star held limply in my hands, and reviewed my life thus far. A silken thread traced the spider's journey: six circuits of the rim, each punctuated with dots of attachment as it had clung to my head in the breeze. The last circuit ended abruptly at the edge of the peak.

I'd lost all enthusiasm for Chinese politics and any radical statements I thought that cap could make. It became clear that a little political humility was warranted. And that if I was to make political statements about anything at all then it would have to be on the basis of energetic and sustained intellectual work — in the head rather than what was on it.

My hats in future would be politically neutral.

Why Gen Y loves Obama

POLITICS

Charles McPhedran

It might be the age of Facebook, but rarely has there been more of a prime-time TV moment. Barack Obama ambled down from the podium after his speech and embraced his wife. Michelle was wearing a chunky pearl necklace and a figure-hugging purple dress. Tens of thousands of people waving 'change' signs screamed.

Bruce Springsteen's euphoric 2002 song 'The Rising' blared as Barack and Michelle mingled with their fans in the Minneapolis stadium. 'Michelle looks like Jackie O', my 20-something friend whispered to me. We were sitting in her New York apartment, a time zone away, amazed and enchanted by Obama on CNN. For the majority of young loft-living leftists in New York, Obama is our generation's JFK.

His victory was the culmination of a year of Obama-mania among kids in America. You want to know why he's the first-ever black candidate nominated to contest the US presidency? Start by talking to Generation Y. And not just in my hip neighborhood in Brooklyn. Right across America, young people have a crush on Obama. There are over 76 million members of Generation Y in the US. That makes Gen Y nearly as numerous as the 85 million Baby Boomers.

And people my age have been overwhelmingly for Obama. Twenty-somethings have voted for Obama in all but four states. In Virginia, a Republican-leaning state that Democrats want to win this time, Obama beat Hillary by 52 per cent. Apart from African Americans, Milennials have been Obama's biggest supporters.

And this mobilisation seems likely to continue. Right now, classifieds sites and noticeboards at New York unis are full of summer campaign jobs. Thousands of students are set to head off to Ohio and Florida and go door-to-door for Barack.

And if the primaries are any guide, more young people will vote in November than have for decades.

All this civic involvement seems to belie the traditional stereotypes of Generation Y. In the past, Gen Y has been described as a group who are fixated on Myspace, Twitter and our blogs.

So how has the Obama campaign succeeded in reaching out to a group who've been seen as more interested in who's leading in friendship counts on Friendster than who's going to lead the World Superpower?

Superficially, it seems his campaign won out with the traditional pop-culture crowd

pleasers: sex, drugs and rock 'n' roll.

Sex and rock 'n' roll? Last year's 'Obama Girl' song 'I Got a Crush on Obama' was named by *People* as the biggest web video of 2007. A group called 'Barely Political' made the video, which features a voluptuous fan in a low-cut singlet lip-synching to syrupy R 'n' B.

Drugs? Obama's admitted using cocaine. And unlike the Clintons, he's been open about his dope fiend days.

So Obama's the rock-star candidate. But he's also more than that. His speech in Minneapolis on Tuesday invoked the tradition of liberal American reformers. He mentioned the legacy of Franklyn Delano Roosevelt, who built the welfare state. And he name-checked JFK, inevitably.

But he also seemed to promise a messianic rebirth. 'Generations from now, we will be able to look back and tell our children ... this was the moment when we began to provide care for the sick and good jobs to the jobless; this was the moment when the rise of the oceans began to slow and our planet began to heal.'

This is the language of a total break in history: a new beginning. Even though Obama was a toddler during the 1960s, his rhetoric echoes the speeches of the time.

Indeed, he often sounds like a combination of Martin Luther King, with his social justice gospel, and Eugene McCarthy, the 1968 anti-war presidential candidate.

Although Obama is promising to end the culture wars that began in the 1960s with the feminist and gay rights movements, his young supporters see something different altogether. They believe that he will end the fights over abortion and gay rights by refusing to acknowledge that either are problems.

And, as such, for the first time in our lives, a Democratic Party presidential candidate doesn't seem that he's picking his policies based on the polls.

He also promises that we, too, can become part of his 'movement for change'. So maybe Obama wins the youth vote because he flatters our 'Facebook generation' vanity. Change what? Ourselves? The nation? Or our community? All of that, all at once! Obama's message seems ultimately that everything can change with one status change (that 'Barack Obama is now President').

If he's just another politician come November, we'll be ruing our naivety.

Rising — not falling — in love

POETRY

Shane McCauley

Rising in Love

There was no falling about it.
It was a walk upwards
as to sacrifice
as to mountain crests
for hidden vistas.
It was simple as soaring
of realising
how easy it is to fly
when you close
your eyes
to shake off earth's
muddied surface
and tread nothing
nothing but clouds.
It was all about ascent.
Assent. Rising together
on the great arch
of yes
precision of knowing
that what was
still is

Zen

'You go in ships in search of bliss,
yet what you seek is here in Ulubrae.'
Horace
How to step back
from your satori
and live again
the oblique progress
to this state?
You enter the mirror
and find a thousand
other selves each
about to enter
a mirror ...
You climb the mountain
and find what of course
you could not
expect — that vast sea
suspended, infinite.
How to step back
having uncovered
this, having reached
where one journey's end
uncoils a beginning.
You see yourself
approaching from

the distance — smile
when you meet
and pass on.
As the wave is water
and the flame fire
so are we wish
so are we desire
to break or to burn.

Edward Hopper's *Nighthawks*

Whatever they said
was said long ago.
Neither of them
is talking any more.
They choose not to look
at one whose back
is turned to us.
They could if they
wanted to. They
are not looking
anywhere at all.
Who would have thought
hell's walls could be
so bare? Not even
a clock to tick-tock
the moments.
Whatever lingers between

them will not

wait the night through.

Whatever has been seen

together will now be seen

alone.

And there will be time

to ask

where all the time has flown.

The trouble with alcoholic Australia

COMMUNITY

Barbara Chapman

Binge drinking and street fighting are baffling authorities, but should we really be so surprised? Two generations of disadvantaged males have failed to fit orthodox economic rationalist theory, with no Plan B in sight. They have become outsiders in their own country, while experts' early warnings of a social tinderbox went unheeded.

Sue Richardson, Professor of Economics at Flinders University, has charted labour market trends for men throughout the present lopsided boom. In 1978, only about 20 per cent of single Australian males aged 35-44 lacked secure full-time employment. By 2003, this had blown out to 35 per cent. Richardson has long predicted grave social consequences, as did Tony Nicholson, Executive Director of the Brotherhood of St Laurence, in 2004.

While the Howard Government boasted of record employment growth, data from the Workplace Research Centre tells a fuller story: 87 per cent of new jobs created in the 1990s boom paid under $26,000; around half paid under $15,600.

Australia's battlers were further assailed as a social security tradition unbroken from Menzies to Keating was radically commandeered for the Howard Government's tilt at the 2001 and 2004 elections. Families with dependent children received the most welfare support (35 per cent in 2005), although their numbers had been declining for a decade.

Conversely, age pensioners' share fell 4.6 per cent to 31 per cent, despite their swelling ranks. Unemployment and disability support accounted for only 25.4 per cent, up from 24.8 per cent, although the numbers locked out of the boom were soaring.

Criticism of middle-class welfare and pork-barrelling, at the expense of the disadvantaged, flowed like water off a duck's back. The poor became outsiders even in the welfare system, and were heavily policed for fraud.

In zealous, ideological pursuit of a 'level playing field', working class jobs were abolished, exported to cheap labour countries, or reinvented on pitifully low pay. Safety nets were snipped. A swathe of marginalised, unemployed and low paid men was created, even as John Howard claimed Australians had never been better off.

These men were locked out of the marriage market by their unattractive socio-economic status; or, if partnered, were statistically more likely to divorce or separate, creating a 'failed family'.

Should we expect second-generation, disenfranchised young people from ruptured and distressed homes to be quietly prospering? 'Losers' in a world where 'winners' take all, these youths have little hope of a job, or even a rented home. Conventional 'success' by extreme wealth is inconceivable.

Inevitably, young people locked out of a society will create new, accessible status and achievement systems. Often this can include crime and substance abuse.

Alcohol is pivotal to this unfolding crisis. For the rich, alcohol consumption marks fully-fledged membership of Australian society. For celebrities and movers and shakers, binge drinking is 'partying:' the acceptable, celebratory, sexy use of alcohol.

Not so for the poor. They are publicly stigmatised for 'abuse' of psycho-active substances, although alcohol, the perennial default for troubled individuals, provides mood relief, and its communality counters alienation.

The traditional glue which had sustained working class communities, including humour, mutual care, and a strong sense of community, is itself a casualty of our rapid transformation from a society to an atomised economy of individualistic pursuit.

Blaming, capsicum-spraying, punishing, and locking up already disadvantaged youth only further damages them, and exacerbates society's problem. They merely mirror the lack of socially intelligent planning which has shipwrecked the dreams of the young, and the security of all.

Had we cut our coat according to human cloth, we would never have forced vulnerable people into ill-fitting economic templates. We'd have moderated policy, maintaining traditional, fairly-paid working class jobs and the dignity of work so vulnerable children were reared in stable households.

We'd have identified and developed the best skills of vulnerable youth, opening basic doors to a future of hope and optimism.

Instead, ideologues severed economic lifelines for the disadvantaged, gutted poor schools, enshrined user-pays and mutual obligation, ostracised NGOs which advocated for the poor, and deemed welfare and training unsustainably expensive.

Greed extols great cost. The indicting symbol of our times is not the failed, addled youth living out their grief and hopelessness in a society that has sold its heart. It's the finely attired urban businessman who urinates on a homeless person asleep in a city doorway.