

From the Kitchen

27 May 2009

Despite the season, it's warm enough for me to take my jumper off – the low afternoon sun streams in through the large kitchen window. “If you can't stand the heat ...”

At this time of the day, I prefer this corner of the house – the large, scarred pine table; the clean benches, not yet covered with the litter of the evening meal; the dog lying half on my feet, his idea of a cuddle; the quiet before the children stream along the footpath outside, on their way home from school.



Damn! I knock my chair over and send the dog scurrying, as I lunge for the stove – the milk is boiling over the top of the saucepan. I turn off the gas and whisk the saucepan away. Damn! So much for peace. A cloud slides over the sun.

After a clean-up and more milk, I sit back on my rescued chair and sip my strong, spiced cocoa. The dog sits in the corner, regarding me with his head cocked at an angle. Can he trust me not to explode into action again?

Can I recover my meditative mood?

My writing pad and pen still lie on in the table, unused. *Tabula rasa* – blank slate. It can be daunting to start something when *anything* is possible. Boundlessness can be scary and it can be debilitating. It's easier when there is something to push against, to rail against. Not that there's not plenty of the latter. There's so much in the world that makes me angry, but don't get me started. Actually, yes do; that's what I need.

But where do I start? There's so much wrong with the world; there are so many idiots out there and so many people who don't care.

I suppose I could look at the glass as having at least something in it – there *are* people doing the right thing, people who care, people who want to make a difference.

Aaaah ...that chocolate tastes good. The cloud has moved on. The dog is at my feet again, snoring.

Yesterday, a schoolgirl, probably forty-five years my junior, held a door open for me. It gave me a warm feeling and I'm sure she felt better for it. What has people do something nice for a complete stranger? Is it purely the good feelings? Do we get an endorphin rush from unsolicited unselfish actions? If that is the case, does it make the action selfish? Is it enlightened self-interest?

What about the tens of thousands of people who gave so generously to the Victorian Bushfire Appeal? Over three million dollars. Where's the self-interest in that? And the hundreds, possibly thousands, who volunteered their time and expertise to help in the clearing up and rebuilding?

For some people volunteering gives them recognition and a sense of purpose. Many people do paid work that is unfulfilling, even enervating and soul-destroying. What they do voluntarily helps to balance or redeem their lives. Others simply want to have something worthwhile to do.

What is the difference between playing golf in your 'spare' time and driving elderly people to and from appointments with doctors? How do we judge that which is 'good' to do? And how do we judge the people doing one or the other?

As always, there are two types of people in the world: those who see a need and act to fill it, and those who see the same need and declare that ‘they ought to ...’ Maybe the ‘aorta’ people have had a heart bypass.

I know I feel better for occasionally being able to let another driver join a busy stream of traffic or to help an older person with a heavily laden shopping trolley along a sloping footpath. And I feel better when someone holds a door open for me – for a start, I am reminded that I’m not personally responsible to ensure that everything in the world runs as it should. I can take the odd minute off.

The dog knocks over a chair as he gets up suddenly and rushes to the front door to greet my wife. He’s sure to get acknowledgement in the form of pats and “what a good dog you are”. Enlightened self-interest?