

## *From the Kitchen*

4 August 2010



The experiences had by any one individual enhance the experience of the entire human race. It is, therefore, pointless to decry the inability of one person to have the same experience as another. Women can experience pregnancy, childbirth and breastfeeding. That men cannot does not diminish them as people.

It is also a nonsense to suggest that a woman who cannot experience any of these, or chooses not to, is any less a woman or is in some way a diminished human being. Men are capable of fathering many children with many different women. Most men choose not to do so and this choice in no way diminishes them as men. There are both men and women who criticise any person who chooses not to live up to others' expectations. I have met a primary school teacher with a PhD in nuclear physics, who decided not to pursue a career as a scientist. I have spoken with a truck driver who had degrees in politics and in fine arts. Driving a truck allowed her to write and occasionally paint.

I myself have studied and worked in the law, social work, psychotherapy, massage and bodywork, business management and computer support and programming. Some of this studying has been formal and some has been self-directed. I now put most of my energy into writing and photographing.

We are probably all capable of doing and achieving much more than we ever do, but we make choices all the time about what aspects of ourselves we wish to explore, express, put effort into and learn from. I am quite happy to enjoy the fruits of someone else's labours and I am more than happy for others to enjoy the fruits of my creativity.

How we see ourselves and the labels we apply to ourselves to a large degree dictate what we do and how we express ourselves. These labels often come from others, but we can accept them or reject them. Some labels we are born with (such as fe/male) and they come with a huge load of assumptions, prejudice and social expectations. So do labels associated with ethnicity, skin colour and language spoken at home.

We are socialised by our family and, later, through our schools. We take on or reject the prejudices of those around us and in this we are responding to the labels others put on us and the ones we stick on ourselves. By being A we preclude being B or C. This leads to women denying the male aspect of themselves and men denying their inner female. Very few people grow up to be balanced and rounded individuals. We deny parts of ourselves that do not fit the labels and, in so doing, we limit our experiences and our expression of self.

The downside of all this is that those unexpressed parts of us will often seek expression in ways that do not suit us and at times that are inconvenient. A lot of the unexpressed aspects lurk in the unconscious and are, therefore, not available to us to work with. However, we can gain access to them through hints in our emotions and our feelings. We can learn to recognise the hints that some unexpressed part of us is pushing to get out. Part of the trick to doing this is to not be limited by the labels. Parents can play an important role in teaching children to

live outside the expectations of others and to explore outside their own limiting expectations. School teachers could do the same and a few do.

It can be scary to behave off-label – to do things that others don't expect from you, or that you don't expect from yourself; it can also be exhilarating. We can hide behind the labels, especially those we have applied ourselves. We can feel naked without them, but the possibilities opened up are infinite.

To not stick labels on others requires an unusual level of mindfulness and self-awareness. Putting labels on another person simplifies our relationship with that person but removes dimensions and depth from our interactions. This diminishes the human experience and has us respond to others on the basis of what is not there – we end up, individually and as a society, living a lie. This is supported by the media, which seem to prefer dealing with issues in a two-dimensional way. Dealing with a multi-dimensional world requires greater effort and honesty than most people are willing to engage with.

How, then, can we make sense of the world? How can we respond intelligently and effectively to what is around us if we fail or refuse to see it as it is? How can we make choices that are best for us if we restrict the information on which we base such choices? If it looks like a duck, swims like a duck and quacks like a duck, are we able to see it other than as a duck?

These issues and questions come to the fore when we need to make choices as a society. At times of political elections we tend to go for the labels. When needing to respond to 'evidence' of environmental crises, we can easily fall into the two-dimensional clichés. We have a responsibility at such times to give up the laziness of simplicity for the sake of making a difference in the world and, perhaps, even to ensure survival.