

From the Kitchen

22 September 2010



I like to tell myself that I am in control of my life, that I do or do not do things as I choose. The reality is that this is both true and not true.

I choose to be a writer and to spend as much time as I can on this enterprise. However, this does not (yet) put food in my mouth or put bespoke clothing on my back, so I choose to ‘work’ two days each week. However, for some time the owner of the business where I work has been making it clear that he would appreciate having the benefit of my inestimable services for more days, as there is so much to do. It is in my hands and sometimes I succumb to his heartfelt requests and my occasional wish for more money (for that new pair of faux alligator shoes). The choice is mine.

It comes down to how I view such a situation. I can take it as ‘pressure’ or see it always as opportunity, to be taken up or not and my ‘boss’ accepts that I choose the latter and, as a consequence, he is grateful. The decision to see it as opportunity empowers me – to see it as pressure would be to give up that power.

I have recently experienced this pressure / choice situation in relation to something else: a large family reunion in Belgium, to which my father and son are going. Should I go or shouldn’t I? (‘pressure’) Will I go or won’t I? (my freedom to choose) There were many considerations: can I afford it?; I had always imagined going for a European jaunt with my wife; is it worth going all that way for just a few weeks?; I know almost no-one who will be there.

My whole life I have had money when I needed it, sometimes from unexpected sources. Therefore, being able to afford it is a non-issue and that also takes care of the question of whether two weeks is a good enough return for a return airfare – it is the same amount of money no matter how long I go for. My attending this reunion has no bearing on whether my wife and I go to Europe next year or the year after (see money issue, above). In essence, my going to the reunion does not preclude our travelling together later any more than my popping down to the shops this morning for a litre of milk precludes our going shopping together this afternoon – it is only a matter of scale. Worrying about not knowing anyone who will be there is a cop-out. As Yeats may have put it: strangers are simply people you haven’t met yet. I am flying out in three weeks, probably with my fears mostly intact and with a readiness to explore the old, which will be new again.

I was last in Europe for 3½ years in 1976 - ’79, the first time I had been there since leaving at the age of seven in 1955. My absence since 1979 represents a much longer gap. I no longer have contact with any of the strangers I met back then and most of the relatives I will be meeting this time were not born yet. The (re)union is of my paternal grandmother’s side of the family with people coming from North and South America, Australasia and, of course, Europe; possibly even from the Middle East.

If I were active on Facebook, I would possibly 'know' most of them, as dozens of them keep in touch with each other that way. I frequently and regularly receive requests to be friends with yet another unknown distant cousin, much removed. What connects me to all these people, other than DNA? Does sharing a common ancestor from four or five generations back mean anything? I will find out in 4½ weeks, perhaps.

Having chosen to go to Europe, there are consequent necessary activities – booking the flight, making arrangements locally for my absence – and not just for me. My 'boss' will have to do without me, as will my family and the dog. I have to sort out what to pack (do I have enough socks and underwear not to have to wash clothes while I'm away?) and what not to, how to manage access to money and how many rolls of film to buy. Oh, forget that last one; I forgot that we have gone digital since I was last there. Will three memory cards for my camera be enough? Passport? (check) Visas? (not needed) Tax return? (when I get back) Dental appointment while I'm away? (reschedule) What about the episodes I will miss of my favourite TV shows?

The illusion of being in control is being sorely tested. With all this pressure, I have to remind myself to handle all this bird by bird¹.

1. see my review of *Bird by Bird* by Anne Lamott at <http://www.thinking-allowed.com.au/2009/11/09/bird-by-bird/>