

## *From the Kitchen*

21 March 2012



I have been reading about a man who pretended to be someone other than who he was. At least, that was how he was described in the late 1880s in England. It has made me wonder how someone can not be who they are and what leads others to think this way.

This man, despite his pretence at being a daring adventurer, shipwrecked in north-west Australia, was, I would argue, being himself. The thing that upset so many people at the time was that *they* thought he was someone else. They had trusted him and, on the basis of that trust, had believed what he told them. They were excited by his stories, wanting to believe him. If he had been an avowed teller of tall tales, his audience may have been equally excited, equally transported.

It is the transportation out of the hum-drum, local and every-day that people seek in stories – whether told in person, read, heard on the radio or watched on film or stage. When being told a fiction, knowing it to be fiction, we willingly suspend disbelief. We trust the story for the anticipation and the effect it will have on us. If we are told, and we believe, that the story is ‘truth’ rather than fiction, we can be similarly affected. Sometimes ‘real’ events are told in the guise of fiction and we accept it as fiction.

Many studies have shown that the brain cannot readily distinguish between what is real and what is make-belief. If we react differently to these, it is because we decide to, ahead of the ‘event’.

Why were the people in England so upset that they had been conned? I surmise this to be the result of finding out that his stories were fiction. The suspension of disbelief is fragile and can be shattered by so many things. If, when watching a film set in ancient Egypt, we see a wristwatch on the arm of a slave, we may find it difficult to continue to enjoy the film. If, on the other hand, the film is a fantasy exploring what might have happened if people in ancient Egypt had some of our modern technology, the sight of the wristwatch would not have broken anything.

Our interactions with everyone are based on trust, even to the extent that we trust that the person spinning a tall, barely believable story is doing so honestly – that s/he is up-front about the verity or otherwise of what they are going to tell us. Like suspension of disbelief, trust is fickle. Once broken, it is hard to resurrect.

We need to be able to trust. Without this, we would have to independently verify everything we are told, everything we are not personally witness to. Our lives would have to be much slower, as we take the time to check everything out. Another solution would be to have fewer interactions with others.

Despite this, many people go out of their way to put themselves into situations where that trust is tested. If it weren’t so, scams to extract money from people dishonestly would not have so much success. Often, the gullibility that have people take risks of trust arises from a wish that things were different than they are and those people are willing to believe someone who promises to make it so.

For most of us, our trust is not always entirely naïve – the person who sets out to gain our trust in order to then betray it, feeds us enough to have us believe them to be honest and trustworthy.

There is a difference between trust and hope. When we buy a lottery ticket, the only trust involved is that the lottery will be conducted honestly and that, should we win, the money will be paid to us. We don't trust that we will win – we hope that we will. To some extent this is also true when we are on the way into a personal/romantic relationship. We start off being hopeful, but there comes a time when that hope turns into trust because of promises given on both sides or because of expectations coming from assumptions. From that time on, something going 'wrong' in the relationship will be taken as a breach of trust rather than a shattering of hope.

To go back to the dishonest entertainer of the late nineteenth century ... People of the time knew little about this large southern continent and were open to hearing about all manner of strange and exotic creatures and to be told of fantastical adventures. But they expected them to be true.