

From the Kitchen

13 June 2012



Glass of red wine in hand, in a cosy café corner, I watch the rugged-up pedestrians scurry to their next distractions, where they can thaw out their ears and mop up their nasal exudations.

I remember autumns like this and the cold winters that followed. I welcome the change from the mild winters we've had for some years. I prefer the very dry-cold weather to not-so-cold dampness. Half-hearted winters tend to produce more of the latter. Half-hearted anything is to be avoided – those things that are neither one nor the other.

That is probably why I enjoy strong, black coffee and dark chocolate. I prefer my lemon tarts with a sharp tang and my marzipan bitter. I would rather debate someone with strong opinions than half-baked ones; then, when they are convinced by my strong (correct) arguments, they will change their beliefs whole-heartedly. There *is* a caveat: bigots are no fun – those people with unshakable beliefs that they expect to carry to the grave. There is no point arguing with them, just as it is useless shaking your fist at the rain.

Perhaps we won't experience many more very cold winters in Melbourne, if the projections from climate research are correct. If they are, Melbourne will have its seasons become more moderate and we may, like areas farther north, end up with just two seasons: wet (in summer) and dry (in winter). 'Twould be a shame.

Polar opposites are essential to our existence. Without them there would be nothing distinguishable nor any intelligence to appreciate the absence of distinctions. The whole universe is, according to astrophysicists, tending to a state of sameness, although they talk in billions of years. On this planet we are tending at much greater speed towards such a state. The earth's crust is replete with differences, many of which we extract and use to run our lives and to ruin the areas around us. Pulling things from the ground and spreading them on the surface, in the air and in the water, is pushing the planet towards undifferentiated blandness. We are giving entropy a helping hand.

Australian society is rife with difference: in the way people look, speak, behave and think. There are many in this society who would prefer those differences to be blended out of existence. I do not believe such a melange to be possible, even it were desirable.

Probably for (originally) good survival reasons, we are averse to difference, but why do so many people still fear otherness? Is it still in the expectation that people who are different from us may pose a threat? Yet, my reading leads me to believe that most threats to any identifiable group come from within that group, even within the family. You can still hear people declare, "I hate Brognarians generally, even though I must admit that some of my best friends are Brognarians."

There are many other aspects of our lives that rely on contrasts and differences for enjoyment. Music is one. Although I know there are exceptions, most people enjoy music that is dynamic: in tonal range, rhythm and colour. A constantly repeating, undulating pattern may be useful to go to sleep to but it is unlikely to hold anyone's interest or engage them emotionally. Visually, a landscape with different shapes and colours is more likely to be

interesting, even to be described as beautiful, than is a flat expanse which has no discernible features, even on the horizon. We find clouds of different shapes interesting, especially as these change, compared with a featureless, grey sky.

Though we may not admit it, we mostly enjoy events in our lives that take us out of the daily, 'normal' rhythms. The unexpected can excite us and have us feel more alive, although the curse attributed to the Chinese may indicate that many people prefer the hum-drum and the predictable: "May you live in interesting times."

Though we may curse the bad news we hear and read continually in the media telling us about misbehaviours and excesses, our lives would be less memorable, memories being most easily attached to emotional experiences. While we may resist large-scale changes in our lives (especially if imposed from outside), these call on us to wake up out of the repeated ebb and flow of daily living and to find skills and qualities we may not have used for a long time or to learn new ones.

Most changes around us take place quite slowly and we ignore them (or we are unconscious of them) until they have evolved too far for us to ignore. If we changed slowly to adapt to these slow external changes as they happened, we would have fewer upsets. Perhaps we behave the way we do in order to experience the upsets.

Bring on the extremes of weather so that I may not fall into the marshland of indifference and forget it is not all there is to experience.