

The Cenotaph

Ecclesiastes 2v16:

“For the wise man, like the fool, will not be long remembered; in days to come both will be forgotten. Like the fool, the wise man too must die!”

Chapter 1

It is Midsummer in terms of modern society. The average wage to bread to milk to jeans multiple is the highest it has been this century. In the cities is it usual to eat at the good restaurants and it is nothing to spend \$15 on a glass of wine, or sometimes buy a bottle of champagne. It is a time of wealth and stability. Although perhaps not in the small towns and rural areas. Here unemployment is high, and land and commodity prices low. But the cities are of much more democratic and demographic importance at the beginning of the 21st century.

It is in a time of such economic and social stability that people are aware of and care about such mundane issues as the relative strength of the dollar, the balance of payments surplus/deficit, and Treasury announcements. Of course everyone is aware of interest rates because this is a nation of homeowners and net borrowers. But for all the concern and media coverage and hype, people's lives would barely be impacted by hearing nothing of these issues at all, except the bank notice alerting them that their mortgage payments were to rise or fall by a few dollars.

In this age of time-saving, and labour-saving devices, what is done with the extra time and extra labour? Where do people's minds turn when they are not working? Today there are numerous places to turn, although the few at the top are: sport, getting ahead, discussing politics, building personal wealth, socialising and having fun, music and the arts, and for the under motivated - television.

At times though a person will think of more than the immediate future. They will think of a time when they will no longer walk the streets, when life will go on without them. They come to the realisation that something outside them, something that will endure and acknowledge their existence, is important. In fact somehow more important. What triggers these episodes is uncertain, except that they appear more often in stable societies and appear more numerous with age.

The foetal stirrings of the realisation motivate graffiti for example. The feeling is reinforced when the graffiti artist walks by later and sees his handiwork, outside of him and seemingly permanent. The immature stages of this deeply embedded desire motivates property developers to build skyscrapers, authors to write, the forgotten to assassinate, and the talented to become stars. However, these achievements only generate a place in history, a reference point, a focus, a memory to others. Sometimes not even that.

All of these are mirages.

The actualisation of this deep desire has two levels of maturity: physical and spiritual. The only stage of maturity and fulfillment of the physical is the birth of a child. At a base level the genetic code of each parent is continued. But also the culture and personality of each parent is kneaded together, rolled out, and cut up like fresh bread dough where the experiences of life are added as ingredients and baked into new person. Each new generation takes a part of the old and preserves its existence and its genetic and cultural and personal uniqueness.

At another level there is a spiritual heart of every person. For many this heart is dormant and unknown. For some it is touched and explored but left untended. But those who seek will find, and for those who knock, the door will be opened to them. Their spirit begins to break the surface of consciousness like a germinating seed breaking the earth. The search may take many turns and many dead-ends, for there is a maturity of spirit as in everything else. But when the germinating seed breaks through into the light of the world, it begins to grow strongly, and towards the light. During the growth and maturity of the seed, a glimpse of eternity is caught and the realization is born that the spiritual development of themselves and others is the reason that the "future-desire" exists. They will realise that many millennia in the future the only impact their life will have had is the spiritual impact they and their descendants have made.

There is a name for the desire to be remembered, to have an impact on the future, to be more than a life lived and a life forgotten. That name is cenotaphism.

Chapter 2

Alexander worked in a large, vibrant and colourful office in the Wellington CBD. The accounting firm he worked for had a large vision, his colleagues were intelligent, motivated and vibrant. Colour flowed into his corner office from the blue waters of the harbour, the green hills around the harbour, and the bright Sunflower painting on the wall of his office.

From the outside his life looked ordered and settled. His future planned out and set within the tight boundaries of social norms. But let us look at his cenotaphic anatomy.

His spirit-heart is dark and cold. There are a couple of memories of Sunday School, and singing hymns, and a half forgotten memory of lying in the sun as a child and feeling a peaceful presence and talking to God. But there is no awakening, and no searching. When he occasionally turns his eyes there, there is an emptiness and a unfulfilled feeling and so he quickly turns away.

His mind-heart is different though. The desire to be more than he is, to be noticed, remembered, to go on beyond his years, is growing strong.

What was it that ignited the touch-paper of this desire? Perhaps it was age, and the approach to his 40th birthday. Perhaps it was his recent reading of Ghandi's autobiography, or some of the startling movies he had seen. Perhaps it was a rebellion against the orderliness and predictability of his life. Probably it was all of these mixed with other less recognisable stirrings.

Whether it was that the shackles of conformity were loosed from him, or that his willpower was so strong, is difficult to tell. What is certain though is that although hundreds of people across the country are going through similar crises and stirrings, it was Alexander who shut the door on the world he had known, and strode down the tangled and seldom trodden path of obeisance to cenotaphism.

On a crisp Spring morning Alexander gave notice and agreed to work the required month. He used his winding down time to sell his accumulated investments: shares and unit trusts, a rental property and his own house in Karori. He rang his solicitor and arranged all of the funds and a forestry investment he still held, to be placed into a family trust.

He had successfully deflected the questions of friends and colleagues, but at his leaving party, he dropped a couple of comments about finding a lifestyle block and leaving city life behind. His aspirations were well understood, and more than a handful of his friends felt a little jealous. All said they would come to visit, and most of them meant it.

At sunrise the next morning, Alexander drove his fully laden four-wheel drive wagon to the ferry terminal and began his journey. Nine hours later, tired and hungry, he drove thru the gates of the Orchard House B&B in Lincoln, 19 kilometres outside of Christchurch. He walked down the road and had a steak at The Famous Grouse Hotel. Feeling full and satisfied, he went back to his room at the B&B and started reading "Practical Small Farming in New Zealand" by Trisha Fisk.

An excited feeling in his stomach woke Alexander at 6:15am. It was far too early to ring the agent so he went for a run through the country lanes and any nagging doubts about his decision were dispelled for good. He recharged his body with a hearty farmer's breakfast, cooked and served by the ample Mrs Larsen. Although her breakfast was excellent she had the annoying trait of assuming that because her guests decided to stay at a B&B they must therefore want trivial breakfast conversation.

"Up early were ya?" she said, chubby hand on flabby hips, a few feet from his table.

"Yes, couldn't sleep."

She waited expectantly and when the pause became uncomfortable Alexander said, "I'm looking at a property today."

"Ahh," a smile of glee that she has wrested some information from this tacit stranger, "looking at property are we."

He resisted the temptation to say, "Why have you got the day off?" but thought wisely that the wit would be lost on her.

"Yes, do you know Phillip Metcalf, he's an agent around here" he said.

"Heard of him. Probably all right" she offered, as if he was asking for a resume.

"Could I use your phone to call him?" he asked.

She looked at him as if he'd invited her to nude mud-wrestle (an unfair match), and said with a sniff "It's not my policy but I suppose I could make an exception."

She brought him a cordless phone as if she had the local monopoly on them and watched him carefully to make sure he didn't make a toll call.

His appointment organised, Alexander complimented Mrs Larsen's cooking and said he'd be back later.

Although he had seen photos of the property on the internet and talked to the agent at length, Alexander was in a state of excited anticipation as he followed the map the agent had faxed him. He passed the Moirs Lane and Collins Road, and made a couple of turns onto less travelled roads until he made the last turn onto a quiet country road where the only road markings were the dried splashings of cow-pats dropped by the cows sauntering between their field and the milking shed.

Metcalf was standing next to his ute at the gate of the property. His gumboots pulled up over his moleskins, and with a heavy green shirt that looked like it might have been ironed for a midweek appointment and worn every day since. He waved out to Alexander as he pulled up, and extended his hand as soon as Alexander got out of his car.

"Giddy! A good morning for it!" offered the agent.

"Yeah", said Alexander "nice and quite too, like you said. Let's have a look".

The farm was as good as he had imagined it would be. The five-bedroom farmhouse was full of character, and was big like only a farmhouse can be. Sure it needed a lot of work, but that was reflected in the price, which was comparatively low with the rural downturn. The two-bedroom cottage was better than he had expected, and the shearers' quarters, split into three separate units were quite suitable.

The agent insisted on driving Alexander around the whole farm so that he could view the 117 acres. Alexander had little interest in the land, but went along, and quite enjoyed it. He marvelled that he could sell a four bedroom family home in Wellington, and buy a 117 acre farm with three separate residences and a scattering of farm buildings to boot, and still have money left over. The accountant in him said that the trend must sooner or later reverse, and rural land close to cities must surely increase in value. But he wasn't here for investment purposes, well not that type of investment.

He took the agent's advice on what figure would purchase the property, and completed the sale and purchase agreement. 24 hours later the settlement date had been set for six weeks time and the deposit paid.

Alexander was busy in those six weeks. The vendors were happy to grant his request that he move in to the cottage the day after the deposit was paid. He started renovating it immediately.

Alexander had an architectural firm draw up plans for three more dwellings, in the style of shearers' quarters. He sent his application for building consent for the three more shearers quarters of three bedrooms each, to the Selwyn District Council. He was careful in his application not to state their purpose, and whether because of surprise or delight at some rural development in the area, the Council granted his application within a month.

Early on he visited his neighbours. He deliberately dressed like they did and spent some hours complimenting them on their farms and generally trying to make a good impression. He acted with the farming ignorance that came naturally, and tried to minimise the impression that he was a green townie. After he had dropped a few hints and deflected the questions about his plans, Alexander struck a deal with an adjoining farmer, Miles Norbury. Alexander would lease more or less 100 of his 117 acres to Norbury. In return, Norbury would pay all of Alexander's rates and in addition, would annually supply Alexander one beast and six hoggets, all butchered, packed and ready for the freezer. Both parties were extremely happy with the deal, and Alexander took a bottle of 30 year old Port to Norbury's farm the next evening, and they drank two third's of it while Norbury told Alexander the history of the area and of the community. After consuming several glasses of the Port, Norbury lapsed into farming tips and how Alexander could get the best yield from his land. After enduring a slurred diatribe on how he could improve his lambing percentages, Alexander thanked Norbury for the advice and drove back to the cottage. He felt so guilty about driving the six hundred metres somewhat under the influence, that he drove at 10kph with both windows down.

Chapter 3

As Alexander sat on his veranda, a lazy warm nor-west wind disturbed his newspaper. He shook it back into its proper crease with a sharp movement of both hands, and kept on reading. The sounds of the builders hammering away on the new houses drifted up to him on the wind. He smiled to himself and unconsciously rubbed his mouth with his fingers. He found himself back in the personal column of The Press. It was too full of masseurs and escorts, and he certainly wasn't interested in that. He put the paper down on the veranda table and put the hot coffee pot on top of it. He fetched the note pad the real estate agent had given him, and wrote out his own personal ad:

Educated, intelligent, healthy, fun and interesting man (39) with good taste, financial independence and rural lifestyle close to city, seeks non-smoking, woman (under 30) with healthy way of life to enjoy same with a view to sharing lifestyle. Looks less important than personality, but photo appreciated. Reply PO Box 205 Lincoln.

He put the ad in the Press for four Saturdays and posted it on an internet singles site.

The response was overwhelming. From the first Tuesday after the ad was placed, there was at least one letter in his box. He looked forward to driving down to the post office every morning. Out on the veranda he read the paper and opened the mail. He looked at the photographs and read the letters. Some he dismissed immediately. Those with bad grammar, misspellings, children, and unusual requests or ideas were the first to go. He only rejected one on the photograph. The photo was taken in a passport booth. It showed a dishevelled woman in her mid-thirties, with red puffy eyes and a down-turned mouth. Her print dress was rumpled and she had slouched for the photo. He felt sorry for her for a moment and then put the photo back in the envelope and filed it under "No" in his folder.

The large majority of responses were however from attractive, interesting and educated women. He was surprised that they were single, that they would read a personal column, that they would respond. But he caught himself. I'm just the same, he thought. Why shouldn't there be plenty of us out there, looking for someone, looking for something.

On the Wednesday of the following week, he sent 11 "thank you for responding but I don't think we are quite compatible" letters. He sent four others a "thank you for your letter, I will be in touch shortly". He was then left with his top four and wrote them the following letter: