

A COLLECTION OF **bytestories**

A WEBSITE SERVING AS AN ARCHIVE OF MY
DIFFERENT ADVENTURES ON PLANET EARTH...



BY DEB WILLIAMS

Contents

Story Title	Page
Lasting influence	2
Last reunion	3
Elephants Never Forget	4
Beach Bounty	5
The Recycled Orchestra	6
Laugh at ageing	7
Overcoming fear	8
Brighten the corner where you are	9
Weekend in a tree house	10
Car troubles did not deter us	11
Incredible Instinct	12
Drastic Action	13
Packed Like Sardines	14
How to embarrass a parent	15
About Author	16

Lasting influence

A memory that has stayed with me over the years is the special present my father gave my mother in 1975: the book 'Superwoman' by Shirley Conran. I was fascinated by her ideas and read it eagerly, discussing many of the issues with my mum.

We both started putting some of those suggestions into practice, and several have had a lasting influence. Four that stand out are: don't dye your hair, don't shave your legs, don't paint your nails, don't be a slave to fashion.

The idea was that cutting out these activities would save a lot of time that could more usefully be spent in other areas. Bar a few brief flirtations with the dyeing and painting, I have happily lived the last four decades in keep-it-simple mode.

This not a criticism of those who choose otherwise, rather an expression of something that has worked for me over the years. We are all different, and I know that many find great satisfaction and pleasure in pursuing the path of bodily and sartorial elegance.

I admire all the beautifully groomed women, yet I don't feel the need to be the same. It simply is not high on my list. While I do enjoy the occasional special dress-up and looking as good as possible, I have to admit that for me comfort trumps elegance or fashion most of the time. Maybe I was just born that way...

In Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Last reunion

Reunion with loved ones is a very precious thing. The photo depicts my 84-year-old mother sharing a spa with her three daughters in Caloundra when we spent a wonderful 3 weeks together in 2001.

With her and me living in South Africa, one sister in Canada and the other in Australia, getting together took a fair bit of planning and could not happen too often. Each rare occasion was eagerly anticipated and the steadily growing holiday savings gloated over once a firm date had been set.

My mother's energy and can-do attitude was legendary. This enabled us to enjoy many fun-filled activities with her, even when she hit her eighties. She was highly indignant when she was required to have a second form filled in by her doctor before being granted her visa for this visit.

Our love, understanding and acceptance of one another was a deep pool of harmony and joy in which we swam with abandon. We celebrated our similarities and respected our differences.

Sightseeing trips, walks on the beach, taking turns with food provision and preparation, long cozy talks in the evenings, helpless laughter and silliness - four friends making the most of every precious minute.

Her three daughters treasure the memories of this last special time together.

In Caloundra, Queensland, Australia

Elephants Never Forget

Lawrence Anthony's book "The Elephant Whisperer" describes the relationship he formed over some years with a group of traumatised elephants. They needed rehabilitation and he worked lovingly with them until they could be released back into the wild.

What particularly stirs my heart now is the account by his family members of these elephants' tribute to him shortly after his death in 2012. With two matriarchs leading, they walked steadily through the South African bush for 12 hours until they reached his home. They stayed there for 2 days and nights, in recognition of the passing of a friend. True to the saying, they did not forget.

How did they know he had died?

How did they know WHEN he had died?

This example of the wonder of Nature and the power of loving connection ignites further questions.

What unfathomable processes are at work?

Since "The Horse Whisperer" there have been other whisperers with species as diverse as elephants, sharks and eagles. It is understood that the term "whisperer" is not always used literally, but sometimes simply to indicate connection between human and animal. Not having any in-depth knowledge, this is written as an expression of my personal response to this fascinating phenomenon. While animals are generally regarded as being below humans on the evolutionary scale, there is a lot more going on with them than is at first apparent.

In South Africa

Beach Bounty

I am greeted by a million twinkling stars glistening on the sunlit sea. Blue sky above me, ocean before me, coastal forest behind me, beach sand beneath my feet, mountains hazy in the distance – what more could I desire? There is nowhere else I'd rather be.

I start my joyful trek along the firm sand, with gentle wavelets creaming up over my feet in a never-ending cycle of advance/recede. And then the game is on. The first shell calls my name. "Look at me! Pick me up!"

What pleasure I experience collecting shells that attract me. There are no particular requirements, just that there is something about each one that appeals, whether it be colour, shape, patterning or lustre.

When the bag is full and my back is really tired, I call it quits and tell myself firmly, "That's it. No more shells." Ha!

Sure enough, it is not long before a lovely shell is screeching at me to pick it up. Do I abide by my firm decision? Heck no!

"Just one more..." More, and still more, end up floating around loosely in my backpack.

The next step is the blissful playing. The photo above is one example of what I do with my beach findings. Again, there is no specific end result in mind, just an enjoyment of different ways of placing my bounty. The shells are not perfect and my collages are very far from perfect, but they gladden my heart and brighten my day.

In South West Rocks, New South Wales, Australia

The Recycled Orchestra

When I come across moving stories like these, I am filled with admiration for the triumph of the human spirit. I believe that there is always a choice, no matter how improbable this might sometimes seem. When things are really bad it is difficult to stay focused on anything positive, yet this gives the best chance of eventually rising above the circumstances.

One inspiring demonstration of this has come from people living at Cateura in Paraguay, their village built on landfill. In the face of extreme poverty, unhygienic living conditions, lack of education and the presence of drugs, a children's orchestra achieving world-wide acclaim has arisen. Instead of playing in the murky water or working as trash pickers on the garbage dumps, the children are now playing beautiful classical music on instruments made from bits and pieces of junk from the dump.

It did not come easily. Before fruition, the instruments had to be painstakingly constructed and perfected, the children introduced to and then trained in classical music, public awareness raised. Enough people had to care enough to make it happen. Their gift of music to the children has blessed the world and set in motion similar initiatives elsewhere. May their generosity inspire more positive actions in places where the need is great.

Two spot-on sayings from Cateura:

"The solution is not to run away from a place. The solution is to change the place."

"Having nothing is not an excuse for doing nothing."

In Cateura, Paraguay

Laugh at ageing

Some problems in life are easily fixed, while the negative effects of others can at least be minimised by wise choices and actions. The one thing that is not negotiable is the ultimate ending of life on this earth for every person. Gracious acceptance of that reality, along with the unavoidable process of ageing, often enables an easier transition.

After enjoying a good laugh with friends as we shared our more hilarious forgetful moments, I came up with the following light-hearted look at life in the later decades.

I hurry here, I scurry there,
I cannot find them anywhere.
My false teeth gone, oh dear, I fear
Without them I look old and queer.

My specs have also done a duck,
What filthy stinking rotten luck.
A stronger word would also rhyme,
I'll keep that for another time.

Now where's my wretched hearing aid?
Another sense has dared to fade.
A gourmet meal? Ha! What a waste,
I mourn the loss of smell and taste.

But worst of all, the steady drain
On what was once a switched-on brain.
My mind now plays a nasty prank:
I need a name, there's just a blank...

'Forget' is such a beastly word,
Can make me seem and sound absurd.
What can I do, what can I blame?
Oh damn and blast, what is my name!

You are forewarned, there's no escape.
It can't be fixed with sticky tape.
So use time well, accept life's way,
Enjoy the present of each day.

In South West Rocks, NSW, Australia

Overcoming fear

Churning stomach turning to jelly, knees knocking, nausea rising...

I seemed to have been born with an inbuilt fear of heights, as those physical reactions had always shown their ugly faces, uninvited and unwanted, yet inescapable.

A family joke was "Mum and suspension bridges." I simply could not bring myself to walk on those unstable wobbly contraptions. On a trip to NZ earlier this year, the main focus was the great outdoors, which given the topography of South Island had to include suspension bridges: high ones, long ones, wobbly ones...

Determined to finally beat this, I began endless rounds of starting, taking a few hesitant steps, stopping, retreating. I also needed the bridge to be empty. If others were on it, especially those who strode and trod heavily, I could not cope with the wild wobbling and swinging added to the height. What a ninny!

Eventually my friend supported me physically. I must have squeezed her poor hand numb as we took very small shuffling steps and I steadfastly avoided looking down. At last I could breathe again - we were actually across.

The pay-off was magnificent! That feeling of achievement, of having faced my fear, of getting to the end despite the queasy sick sensations and the shaking legs. Walking through the virgin forest on the other side was magical, with the moss-covered strange shapes of the dead wood creating an enchanting Hobbit-land. How glad I was that I had persevered.

In South Island, New Zealand

Brighten the corner where you are

Huddled haphazardly on the outskirts of Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, there is a sprawling slum where about 55 000 people squash into 5000 mostly one-room "houses". The ablution facilities are an outside toilet and one tap in the yard. Children sleep in rows on the floor. Some households are run by children whose older family members have died of AIDS. Unemployment is rife and often children have to manage on one small meal a day, or even none at all.

Several high school boys volunteered to give up their precious Friday afternoons to go and play with them. With the world in such a mess and so many people in desperate need, they wanted to make a positive difference in some small way.

They started with a family where there was only a disabled unemployed grandmother, trying to cope with raising 10 grandchildren. They took crayons, pictures for them to colour in, soccer balls, cricket bats and music to dance to.

Soon many other children in the area joined in, and the visits became highlights for them. As the bus struggled its way up the narrow rutted dirt road to the house, they started running, waving and cheering. What especially warmed my heart was seeing those typical modern teenage boys picking up the littlies and hugging them, and constantly trying to think of more ways to help them.

When they realised that the children were hungry, they started taking fruit and sandwiches. For their caring, for the corner they brightened, I salute those special boys.

In Pietermaritzburg, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Weekend in a tree house

The three children were beside themselves when it was announced that we were going to exchange our home for a tree house for a few days. I have to admit that the parents almost matched the children in terms of excited anticipation.

It was situated in the private Bonamanzi reserve (a Zulu term for “look at the water”), close to the well-known Hluhluwe Game Reserve in KwaZulu-Natal. Our own real tree house, up a ladder into the tree-tops. The wooden structure was simple but totally adequate, and it was a glorious adventure from beginning to end.

Surrounded by natural forest, we were free to roam all over and bask in the bounty and beauty of nature. Dappled sunlight amidst the trees alternated with golden sunshine from clear blue skies, warming us further out in the grasslands.

There were numerous little creatures to enchant us, with the more famous Big Five accessible by car not that far away. We actually preferred wandering in the great outdoors, rather than sitting in a car hoping to spot zebras, rhino, elephants and giraffes etc. (This could however have been due to having done that often enough before.)

Simple living quarters, simple food, simple clothing, simple lifestyle – bliss!

This was in the mid 1980s. I wonder what it is like there now.

In KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

Car troubles did not deter us

We confidently prepared and set off from South Africa in 1984 for a three week holiday in Namibia. My husband had converted an old 1600cc Kombi into a camper, serving as living quarters for our family of five.

When the first puncture stopped us, we soon had the spare in place. When the second puncture struck, our friends' spare went on. Many more miles to traverse, no facility anywhere nearby, no more spares – feeling so extremely vulnerable had my stomach in knots.

The next unexpected event happened in the Okaukuejo Camp of the Etosha Game Reserve. My husband was working on the engine when it suddenly and spectacularly burst into flames. We lost 2 days on that one.

Watching elephants mate late one night at the waterhole, was an electrifying experience. This was matched by waking in the early hours to the breathtakingly ferocious roars of lions nearby.

I can still taste those dust particles in my mouth, feel the furry accumulation in my throat. Mile after endless mile on dry dirt roads, driving deep into the Namib Desert to slide down the huge sand dunes, and find the elusive Welwitschia plants.

Another highlight was climbing to the bottom of the Fish River Canyon and walking along the river bed. The sense of emptiness and vastness was palpable, and in this lay part of its wild beauty.

Car troubles notwithstanding, our trip was rich in a fascinating variety of landscapes and experiences.

In Namibia

Incredible Instinct

What a privilege to witness firsthand one of Nature's amazing provisions for protection. This was in New Zealand in March this year, on South Island near Kaikoura. For quite some time this hidden sheltered spot was not generally known, but now there is a board up with a helpful explanation of what happens.

Soon after they are born, baby fur seals find their own way to safety from ocean predators. Without their mothers they follow a stream uphill until they reach a large pool at the bottom of a waterfall. Every few days they make their way back down to the rocky shore to feed on that vital rich mother's milk. After a few months they instinctively know the time is right for them to rejoin their mothers full-time, now less likely to fall prey to predators.

I walked that steep path alongside the stream through the forest, and had the pleasure of watching baby seals playing in the pool beneath the falls. The scene was idyllic, surrounded as it was by verdant green forest, with crystal clear water gurgling in rock pools and a waterfall completing the picture. They cavorted, swam, dived, indulged in mock fights, almost as if they knew we were enjoying their antics.

It was a delightful experience, enhanced by the awe I felt at seeing this example of how perfectly Nature works. It really doesn't need man to mess with it.

In New Zealand

Drastic Action

I crept closer, the gun held steady in my hand. It had been registered for hunting, so my purpose was appropriate. After previous failures, this time I was determined to succeed. Stealthily I continued to stalk my prey, as I replayed in my mind all the aggravation I had had to endure. Enough already!

Nothing else had worked, and I had tried everything. So it had to be the gun. Taking careful aim, I fired.

The mosquito dropped dead.

In NSW, Australia

Packed Like Sardines

For 6 months our home was an old 1600cc specially converted Volkswagen Kombi from Holland, and it provided us with both shelter and mileage throughout Britain, Scandinavia and most of Europe.

In 1982, having sold our house and possessions in South Africa, we were following our hearts to explore new horizons. With the children aged 9, 7 and 5, the plan was for me to continue their schooling as we went along. This hardly survived a month, as there was simply too much to see and do.

We soon established a routine that worked. Seating for the children by day became the parental bed at night, with the three youngsters sharing sleeping space on the sliding shelf in the raised roof above us. Packed like sardines, we were!

The Kombi was also our kitchen and living room. The bathroom was a stream, river or lake, and the toilet was either the bush or a public convenience. Most of the time we “free-camped” in a variety of lovely rural settings, but we did also go into holiday parks occasionally for a proper clean-up.

Once I bought a tin of what looked like fish, but it contained a nauseating frothy white substance that had us all looking decidedly pale. Soon I became expert at producing tasty one-pot meals, and we all became experts at recycling clothing until we hit the next laundromat. I really enjoyed the quick and easy housekeeping chores.

A trip of a lifetime – what fun it was.

In Europe

How to embarrass a parent

This example of how children can embarrass parents, relates not to how one of mine embarrassed me, but to how I embarrassed my father way back in the mid 1950s.

Having both of my parents teaching at the small rural village school meant that I sometimes accidentally got to hear things not really intended for the ears of a child.

It so happened that my grade 4 teacher had some strange ideas about discipline and he and I used to clash quite a bit.

After yet another frustrating interaction I rushed home that afternoon to unload my feelings onto my parents. They soothed me appropriately, but imagine my glee when later that evening I overheard my father say privately to my mother, "He's just a bloody fool!"

I stored this up carefully, and next time I was at odds with the teacher I triumphantly trotted it out: "Well, my dad says you're just a bloody fool!"

Even now, I cringe when I think of the embarrassment I caused my father. I never did find out how he talked his way out of that one, when approached by a very unhappy colleague asking for an explanation.

Needless to say, that night there was a serious session with my parents, where I learned an important life lesson. Personal matters discussed in the privacy of the home, remain at home. The word 'discretion' became part of my lexicon. That experience marked the beginning of a relationship of mutual trust that lasted a lifetime.

In Utrecht, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

About Author

Deb Williams

I love life! Until 2010 life in South Africa was great, and now life in Australia is great. Consciously choosing to remain focussed on the positive really works, and my life is testimony to that.

Why is the website called bytestories.com?

This is a place for "byte-sized" stories and there is a 1500 character (about 250 words) limit for two main reasons. Firstly, we want you to know that "War and Peace" isn't required to leave your mark. Secondly, it takes about 2 minutes to read each story meaning you can head here whenever you want a quick (and entertaining) read.

If you would like to share a story or create your own eBook, simply head to bytestories.com, Register an account and click on the "Share a Story" button.