

## ***What's the point of remembering,***

a little girl asked. Well, it's what we all do, all the time. You remember your name, don't you? *Oh, it's like learning.* Yes, learning is remembering. Cats and dogs remember their name, too, but they have other ways of remembering as well, but scent. Remembering makes me think. Remembering makes me know that there are differences between your name and mine, between cats and dogs. And today can be different from yesterday. Do you remember what you had for breakfast yesterday? *The same we have every day except sunday then we have eggs do you like eggs?*

That was a good conversation with a young person. For me, the point is also that I can know there is, was, another way to live. Easier. Better I think. Certainly more sustainable. Not as confused, not as violent, not as mean-spirited. People were not as broken up as we have become. Terror and torture; wasteful wars; hatred, division, extremism, and all the other isms that made us forget or ignore what wise men and women all through time have known: the Golden Rule. *Do to others as you want others to do to you; don't do to another what you would not want another to do to you.* Simple; so simple that we cannot remember.

My remembering goes back far in the past. I cannot help but compare. For instance — probably nobody remembers the Melbourne Race. 1936, I was fourteen. Airplanes racing from London, England (now the UK) to Melbourne, Australia. We, my parents, my sister and I, lived in Sumatra, far from anywhere. We had heard of planes but nobody had ever seen one. A newspaper must have told of the latest, fastest airplanes that would be racing halfway around the world, all of them specially outfitted with extra tanks, pilots in goggles and leather outfits. One plane was different, a DC2 passenger plane belonging to a real airline, KLM. There were actually passengers on board, I think. At that time there were almost no airfields between London and Melbourne, so all the planes had to make arrangements to be fueled wherever there was a flat piece of land long enough and smooth enough to land. We were told that the local horse race track was one of the possible landings. There must have been radio in 1936 to give us the latest news. What I remember is that for a few days there were stories about planes that had crashed, planes that were ahead but then missed an improvised landing area. The DC2 passenger plane was still in the race. Not in first place, but hanging in. Then we heard that it was definitely going to land at our race track. Expected early afternoon. No, late afternoon. Then a frantic request for all cars — and there cannot have been many at that time — to go to the race track because the KLM plane was approaching and the race track had no lights. The lights from the cars was dim, we could barely see the track but we heard a never before known sound, coming closer. Then lights switched on in the air as something landed, ran out, stopped. Cheers and excitement everywhere. My sister and I stood on the hood of the car to see shadows in the dark. I don't think the plane stayed long. Lorries (trucks) with fuel drove onto the race track; the plane must have left the same night. In the end the KLM DC2 passenger plane got second place.

The next time I saw a plane, more than one, was only four years later, early May 1940.

Germany had invaded the Netherlands and the fourth day small planes were bombing Rotterdam from the air. I had come to Holland a few months earlier, then staying with friends of my parents who lived on the outskirts of the city. We stood on the widow's walk of the three story house, watching the planes, some single wing, a few double wing. First they dropped explosives then incendiary bombs. We saw the fires begin and spread. The center of Rotterdam burned for two weeks.

A few years later bombers flying over occupied Netherland became an almost nightly event. German planes flying west to bomb London, eventually a thousand (maybe more) planes flying east to bomb Dresden and other cities in Germany. The very last year of the war the Germans used newly invented flying jet engines to bomb London, launched from the center of Dutch cities. It was common knowledge that half of these V1s, later V2s, went up but did not turn west, instead crashing close to where they were launched. That war made airplanes the accepted way of making war and transporting people and things quickly over long distances.

It was another eight years after the end of that war before I actually flew in a plane. About fifteen years after that I made my first 'round the world trip — with stops along the way. Ten years after that I qualified for a million miles card from PanAm.

Now I have not been in a plane for 16 years, and I hope never to have to travel by plane again. Flying was exciting in the 60's, adventurous in the 70's, more and more ho-hum in the 80's and 90's. In this century it has become torture, I am told.

That same graph of expectation, slow progression, faster progression, and then crash, applies to what I think of as "progress." At first progress was something inspiring, then we saw it used for war and destruction, then it flattened to expected and "Yeah, sure," now it shows its real face: progress has changed the planet, and changed us. Hints all along, of course. In 1940 it took a dozen or so small planes to make Rotterdam burn for two weeks. Only five years later it took one plane and one bomb to destroy a large city and kill 100,000 people.

Old age looks back. I rely on a computer, my very limited social life is mostly on the internet, I can choose my own news. But I ache for the loss of people *talk(ing) story* as we say in Hawai'i. We're losing the ability to relate to each other. We think communication is talking at, or to — who talks *with* any more?

Several times I have had to book passage on airlines for other people. There are no fixed fares any more, one cannot phone an agent or even the airline. Everything is charged extra: baggage, lunch, taxes upon special charges. In the cabin recycled air, assuring that whatever bacteria or viruses each passenger carries are generously spread to everyone. Add to that the indignities of checking in. Now, in these last days, we also know that flying is one of the serious polluters of the atmosphere, which may well make our survival as a species questionable.

When we first came to Hawai'i living on the other side of the island from the university where I worked was a delight. The extraordinarily beautiful views on both sides, the tunnel at the pass, it was a daily wonder both ways. We were healthy, living a few houses from the most beautiful beach on the island. The sun was shining, the trade winds kept us cool. Cars and houses did not have air-conditioning; not necessary.

Over the next twenty years the road up the mountain and down became crowded, then very crowded. Now there are three roads and they are all bumper-to-bumper I've been told. "Our" beach is no longer pristine. There is almost no fish in the ocean around these islands any more. The tourists, who are the main "industry" of these islands, don't know that many of the famous white beaches are artificially maintained year 'round by moving sand from a dying beach to a popular one. The second — or perhaps first — industry is "the Military," training troops shooting live ammunition (DU), buying or leasing huge swaths of raw land (often sacred to the Hawaiians) to try out equipment, mostly out of sight of the rest of us. Their planes, their helicopters, always in the air above us. My mind has learned to cancel out that noise.

In the 60's everyone got accustomed to flying. With the children we flew from California, Japan, HongKong, to newly independent Malaysia where we stayed for two years. From there the long way to Hawai'i, via Europe — a very different Europe than I had left in ruins 14 years earlier — to a booming America. After another long ocean flight, Hawai'i. Arriving in Honolulu in the early mid sixties the plane stopped in the middle of the tarmac. Tall stairs were wheeled to the exits of the plane, we carefully walked down to be greeted with Hawaiian music, a hula dance, every passenger got a flower lei from a beautiful girl. Welcome to the newly fiftieth State. The air sparkled, a cooling breeze ruffled our hair, the sharp folds of the mountains looked down on us.

Now there is a new, longer, wider, runway built on a man-made reef off shore, the plane taxis to one of those harmonica tunnels that allow passengers to walk straight into an enormous noisy ice-cold building. No Hawaiian music, just blaring announcements in many languages. The first outside air one gets to breathe is, after finally passing dozens of confusing arrows and announcements, on the curb before getting into a bus, taxi, or private car. The smoky polluted air is a shock. Traffic is a mess. Blurred mountains hide behind sky scrapers.

In my old, old age I would like to be somewhere else, but where? I yearn for the simple life of my youth, for the simple people I grew up with, from whom I learned unconditional love although their language has no word for what we call *love*. I dream of the people of the land where I was born (not grew up) which I rediscovered when I was 30. My heart still cries out YES! when I think of the large, very black man who stopped me on my bike, asking me, whether I was the young DR. Wolff? "I hear you are one of us," he said. *Oh yes, I am, I am!* He pushed me on my way to work again, his whole face smiling. I was never sure who "us" was, but I have always been very sure that I am one of whatever us he had in mind.

We, my own small family, were very poor then. But then was better than now. We've gained gadgets and gimmicks, now rely on dishwashers and dryers. Now there are jets that fly 300 passengers non-stop from here to Bali or China. All very clever but we were never told the true cost. Even now we deny that our progress is destroying the earth we plunder for profit. We lost our soul, our humanity, it seems.

My grandchildren know only today, of course. Do they believe things will be better tomorrow? I don't think so. I'm pretty sure even they know that tomorrow is a question mark, not something to look forward to. At best something to prepare oneself for. A recent

death in the family made me think, he is lucky, he does not have to see tomorrow.

Yes, I know the lands and the people I knew a long time ago exist in my memory only. Even if I could go back to the lands and people as they are now, they would not be as I remember them. So, I tightly cling to today. The plants and animals all around me that survive our drought with a sparkle that is as new as it always was. The purple orchid suddenly blooms again. Tiny ants like the moist dark of the container where I keep a bag of store-bought soil and a torn bag of chicken manure. The sun shines, it is very hot, hotter than it used to be here, but a breeze is making sitting outside pleasant. I hardly notice the glare. Daytime sounds are lawn mowers, and what we call weed whackers, helicopters, traffic, and the occasional rooster. In the evening the sounds are frogs and crickets and other animals I need not identify. Evening sounds are very much like the jungle I grew up in, soothing. When it rains I hear it coming, then drops softly touch the tin roof of my house. If it is a big rain the noise on my roof is deafening; now of course more than welcome.

This morning I walked around, talked to the azalea on the other side that has stopped showing off its fiery red flowers. I worried about the 40ft tall green-striped bamboo that is leaning too far over. The pond is low, lower than I have ever known it. Scientists say that climate change will affect these islands in the middle of the Pacific Ocean by droughts and occasional torrential rains. We know what that means: the rains will soften what little soil a tree found to live on, and even a small wind will push it over. But torrential rains are better than none. We grow enough food here for all who live here: enough calories, enough fruit. If we can learn again to live without electricity these isolated islands might not be a bad spot to be when the storm comes. Even when the waters of the ocean rise higher than they are projected to rise, our island is a very tall mountain, snow on top in winter even though technically we are in "the Tropics" (fewer than 21.5° from the equator).

Today is a good day.

robert wolff, august 2010