

"NOSTALGIA"

by Geoffrey R Usher

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Ten years ago my son Andrew and his then girlfriend Stephanie returned to England after a holiday of nearly three months in Australia, which included Christmas in Sydney with my wife Ann. As the weather in Sheffield got colder and darker, and I thought of them enjoying the late spring and then early summer in Australia's warmth — meals outside, long days of sunlight, swimming at the beach — I tried to persuade myself that I was not jealous. I have to confess: I was not very successful in that attempt to persuade myself that I was not jealous, and I kept finding myself remembering, remembering.. .

In Australia, the long summer holiday — the "Christmas vacation" — begins in mid-December and lasts about six or seven weeks.

When I was a boy in Adelaide, Christmas presents tended to include things like: swimsuits, beach bats and balls, beach towels, colourful summer shirts, perhaps cricket gear; perhaps — very dashing and debonair — sunglasses.

My uncle and aunt had a large home, and they regularly hosted the family celebrations of Christmas Day, providing for up to forty people. Having recovered from what must have been an exhausting day, they then spent January in the caravan park at Port Eliot, eighty kilometres south of Adelaide.

My uncle had made his own caravan, into which they loaded everything, including all the canvas, poles, ropes and pegs to erect a large tented area extending from the caravan, and lots of beds and bedding and other furniture, including the kitchen sink!

The loaded caravan would be hitched to the car — mainly I remember the Whippet Tourer — which my aunt would drive, crawling up the notorious long, steep, winding Willunga Hill — while my uncle drove his company utility, also loaded with gear.

Then they would establish their camp — always the same site near the Caretaker's permanent site and the main ablutions block — and settle in for about a month. My uncle was usually away at work for some of the time, coming back for weekends and the final packing up to return home.

Part of the regular ritual was that my sister, brothers and I would spend some of our January holidays at Port Eliot. Not all of us together — there were five of us — but one or two or three at a time.

For the rest of my life I will carry memories of childhood days at Port Eliot: up to six hours a day in the surf; exploring the beaches and sandhills either side of Horseshoe Bay; day trips to the other little coastal towns; the local picture theatre; the sunburn, and sore, red, sand-filled eyes; and the sandhills at the far end of the caravan park.

They were magnificent, towering sandhills, with broad sweeping sides up which to struggle — two steps up and one step back — as the sand gave way beneath your feet, and down which to run and slide and roll.

They were isolated, desolate, magnificent. Lawrence of Arabia would have loved them!

Then, somewhere along the line — as happens to all of us — things changed bit by bit. My uncle and aunt moved to a different house, and my sister and two of my brothers got married, and the traditional Christmas Day gathering of the entire family gradually seemed to lose its participants and become fragmented, and I got married, and so on. And although my uncle and aunt continued to go to Port Eliot, we went less and less often to join them.

Ah, but the memories! Wonderful material for family get-togethers and "Do you remember the time when ...?" and "What happened to the people who...?"

Then I moved to Sydney, and even the family get-togethers became rare, and usually with only a few at a time — all of us married, with our own homes and families and extended families and so on.

My uncle and aunt eventually stopped going to the caravan park at Port Eliot. They bought a holiday home at Goolwa, another seaside town just a few kilometres away. Andrew, Elizabeth and I stayed there during the two January vacation pulpit exchanges which I spent in Adelaide at the end of the 1980s. And I took Andrew and Elizabeth to Port Eliot to show them the scenes of my childhood.

Alas, how different! How changed! The little, modest, rather down-at-heel caravan park had been up-graded, improved, modernised; and extended. It had been extended all the way to those magnificent sandhills, which had been levelled. Instead of those wonderful towering peaks and broad sweeping sides, there were level, surfaced roads, concrete slabs for caravan sites, modern toilet and shower blocks, with roofs! And poles to carry the electric wires to all the sites. All changed. Changed utterly. It was hard even to explain to Andrew and Elizabeth what it had been like — what had provided my memories.

And I was sad. It is sad. But, it is the way life is, and it is the way it must be.

"Life goes not backward," wrote Kahlil Gibran. He was right. "Life goes not backward, nor tarries with yesterday."

We may hold and cherish our memories. We may even view the past through the rose-tinted spectacles of nostalgia. But we cannot return to the past. We cannot re-create the past.

There is a danger in trying to wish that everything could be "just like it was in the good old days" – which of course weren't always really so good, in spite of the nostalgia industry and the Letters to the Editor bemoaning the decline of civilisation since the days when the writers were young.

Bertrand Russell was a seeker after truth in several areas: philosophy, psychology, biology, history. As a seeker after truth, he said that he could do no other than cultivate the scientific temper.

Scientific knowledge in itself is morally neither "good" nor "bad". Scientific knowledge simply exists in its own right. Moral judgements about it depend on the **use** which people make of it, so the moral judgements are essentially about the people.

In his book Why I Am Not a Christian, Russell explained his rejection of the Christian faith, his rejection of a belief in any "power, not ourselves, which makes for righteousness", his inability to believe in an Almighty God as the source of moral goodness and judgement.

He could not accept the Christian religion, but he believed in an order of "values". He believed in truth rather than falsehood. He believed in beauty rather than ugliness. He believed in moral goodness rather than badness.

He believed that these values were not created – and not destroyed – by people. People can exalt these values, and be loyal to them, and live according to them; or people can reject these values and betray them, and live without any regard to them: to the ultimate good or evil of the community.

Many people do not find Russell's views to be a satisfying or even a rational faith or philosophy of life. And yet it is evidently acceptable to many noble-minded people, who continue to toil for the betterment of the lot of their fellow human beings, while remaining bewildered and baffled by the mysteries of life

And it is interesting to note that towards the end of the book, a "nostalgia" creeps into Russell's reflections. There is a pensive memory of joys once experienced and never to be forgotten. He wrote:

What is dangerous is power wielded for the sake of power, not power wielded for the sake of good. The leaders of the modern world are drunk with power . . . power is not one of the ends of life, but merely a means to other ends, and until (people) remember the ends that power should subserve, science will not do what it might to minister to the good life . . . The lover, the poet, and the mystic find a fuller satisfaction than the seeker after power can ever know, since they rest in the object of their love.

I think, therefore, that the satisfactions of the lover, using that word in its broadest sense, exceed the satisfactions of the tyrant, and deserve a higher place among the ends of life. When I come to die I shall not feel that I have lived in vain... .

I have seen the earth turn red at evening, the dew sparkling in the morning, and the snow shining under a frosty sun; I have smelt rain after drought and I have heard the stormy Atlantic beating upon the granite shores of Cornwall. . . . The sphere of science lies outside (these) values.

Nostalgia! Pensive, appealing memories of happy days, of joys unforgotten and unforgettable.

Last year, like so many years before it, saw terrible dramas of the scientific and aggressive use of unconsecrated power, the tragedies of antagonistic and destructive power. It also, at local and personal levels, brought its share of pain, of sorrow, of disappointment and sadness.

But it also brought its times of happiness of satisfaction, of joy. As we look back on it, and begin this new year, we can also look further back.

Our memories can go back to the days of those holiday seasons when, like Bertrand Russell, we may have seen the stormy Atlantic beating upon the granite shores of Cornwall, or seen the sun setting behind the mountains of Scotland, or seen the reflection of a silvery moon on the calm surface of a lake, encircled by shadowy pine trees and low-lying hills.

Or, for me, those holiday seasons among the sandhills of Port Eliot, the six hours each day in the rolling surf, the walks along the water's edge, and the games of beach tennis or cricket on the hard, wet sand.

It is such memories which add beauty to our life, and help to keep us sane.

It is such memories, together with the memories of joyous comradeships, memories of the kindly, trustworthy people we have numbered among our friends, memories of the laughter of childhood and the promise of youth. . . .

It is such memories which help to reassure us that life is worth living: that the values of truth, beauty, goodness and love are what make it worth living; and that those values will continue to make life worth living through the days and the years that are to come.