

COUNTRY MOUSE AND TOWN MOUSE

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Inglewood Community Resource Centre

A long time ago, in fact around 600 B C, the most famous Greek slave of all time, Aesop (of Aesop's Fables fame) told a story. It was about a country mouse and a town mouse. In recognition of the day we are all celebrating – International Women's Day - I'm going to start by taking the liberty of turning the boy mice in the story into girl mice. You may have heard the fable before, but just in case you haven't, here goes: -

Two mice had somehow met and become friends. That might not have been as easy as it sounds, because one of them had spent her whole life in the city, while the other had never left the farm. They decided to change all that.

So one day, the country mouse invited her friend for a visit. The town mouse hardly had time to pile her Louis Vuitton luggage into the farm house hallway before the country mouse was sitting her down to a meal full of fresh farm produce, which she'd spent all morning gathering. There were lashings of beans and barleycorn and roots, which the town mouse sniffed suspiciously, as she was unaccustomed to their earthy fragrance.

After only a few minutes, dabbing the corners of her mouth with her napkin and pushing aside her half-eaten lunch, the visitor, who obviously had no manners at all, said to her friend : 'I cannot understand how you can put up with such poor food as this, but, of course, you cannot expect anything better in the

country. When you come to visit me I will show you how to live. After you have been in town a week, you will wonder how you ever could have stood country life.'

The country mouse, who was obviously an amiable laid-back young woman, who didn't take offence easily, packed her backpack, and headed off to town with her friend.

After several hours, they arrived at the town mouse's home – a mansion in a street full of other mansions. 'You will want some refreshment after our long journey', said the town mouse, taking her friend's hand and leading the way to the larder.

The country mouse's eyes opened wide as she looked around and saw the shelves crammed with jellies, cake, oats, honey and dates. The two young mice wasted no time and were soon tucking in. Suddenly, with a crash, the larder door burst open. There stood two huge mastiffs, saliva dripping from their muzzles as they stared at the intruders. The mice just managed to squeeze into a hole – their full stomachs were very nearly the death of them – while the dogs howled and snapped their teeth outside.

Trembling in the hole, the country mouse shouted over the racket, 'I think I'll head home.'

'So soon?', asked her friend, surprised.

'Yes,' the country mouse replied. 'I can see that you don't have to spend your life in physical labour. You have all these luxuries on tap. But you are surrounded by dangers. And I would rather enjoy my simple meals in peace.'

Times have changed a bit since 600 B.C. Cities are not the only places that are dangerous nowadays; dangers abound in the country as well. There is nothing

I can tell you about drought or bushfires or the rural recession, and the strains these can place on families. And I have never eaten so well as I do every time I visit my sister. Yet there is no denying that differences still exist between city and country life. And I'm here to say: 'Vive that difference.'

I come from a long line of town mice. Our mother started in prep at St Bridgit's Primary School, North Carlton in 1930 and still attends Mass there and counts the parishioners' donations afterwards for the priest every Sunday. And our dad grew up down the road in Collingwood. I've always lived in cities, even when I was overseas, and if I find myself more than 10 kilometres or so from the CBD, I'm likely to become light-headed. So you may well wonder about my qualifications for commenting on country life. But I believe my very ignorance provides me with a unique perspective.

There is a saying: 'Fish can't describe water' – it's too much just the environment in which they pass their days. Probably, it's the dog who is taken to the beach for her monthly swim, and who spends the rest of her time running around in the heat and dust, who would wax most eloquent about the delights of water, (if she could talk of course). She would be very likely to rhapsodise about the feel of the spray on her skin, delight in the shock of the first wave crashing over her head and savour the delicious smell and taste of the salt. I know I've jumped species rapidly here, from rodents to fish and dogs, but what I'm suggesting is that that dog is me. And I have a thing or two to say to you fish.

My earliest memory of spending time in the country was when I was eight or nine. Back then, we used occasionally to pack the Holden with a day's provisions and head out from suburban Reservoir to visit some families of Dutch

origin who farmed tulips up Monbulk way. I don't know how we met the families. I know Jude has memories of Mum and Dad just pulling over to the side of the road and decanting all of us children over a fence into the nearest paddock, so maybe we just turned up in one of their fields one day, and the country kids invited us to play.

What astonished me most about Monbulk was the sheer **size** of everything in the farm house. There the large Dutch mother with the flour-covered apron sat us all down for afternoon tea at this huge table and served masses of the most delicious scones with jam and cream, that just kept coming and coming. I can't remember her ever saying anything, but the warmth she exuded was more eloquent than words. I remember we used to roll up our used English comics as gifts for the country kids, but those small tight city bundles didn't compare with the expansiveness and generosity of the gift of time spent with them.

And that was about it – the sum total of my country experience – for the next several decades. It was really only when Jude made her tree change and moved to Bunjil Park that I had the opportunity to pick up where I'd left off in 1960.

The first thing I noticed on our inaugural visit for Jude's now-famous bi-annual barbeques was just how lost we city slickers could get. Some of our relatives finally found the farm so late in the day that they only had time to say 'hello' before they had to climb back in their cars and head home. What I've come to realise is that the sense of distance and direction and what you identify as landmarks couldn't be more different in the country from what they are in the city.

Every time I go shopping in the city centre with my partner, who spent his whole childhood in the country, whenever we exit from a department store, he always heads off confidently in completely the wrong direction. Yet, in contrast to me, who until very recently thought that all grey clouds, irregardless of their location, meant that rain was imminent, he can read the clouds like a book and predict weather conditions perfectly – a legacy of country life and an important survival skill for a mad golfer.

My friend Justin, on the other hand, who organises his holiday destinations to maximise the chances of good shopping, knows inner-city Melbourne back to front. Once he wanted to show me some shirts he was lusting after at a shop called Andre's in Melbourne Central. As I stood waiting for him outside Flinders Street station, the rain unexpectedly started bucketing down. Of course, I was totally unprepared, with no umbrella or coat, as was Justin when he arrived a few minutes later. I imagined that would be the end of our jaunt. But I hadn't appreciated the extent of Justin's shopping lore.

'No worries,' he said, 'I guarantee you won't even get your feet wet.' Sure enough, by dint of riding up and down lifts and escalators, using walkways over roads and knowing when to move from one store to the next, Justin was able to plot a course where we never even set foot outside and arrived 20 minutes later at Andre's in immaculate condition.

So there are city landscapes and routes and country landscapes and routes and if you are accustomed to one, it can be hard to appreciate what you may be missing in the other. You may not even be able to see what is right before your eyes. I had an experience of that recently when I asked Jude's partner, Brien,

what was keeping the chickens looking and laying so well. It was only after he directed my attention to their favourite snack, the indigenous berried salt bush, that I noticed it was growing all over the place. Before that, I hadn't even seen it.

Maybe it all comes down to where you and your forebears have spent their lives. I'm told that the Inuit (Eskimos) have 7 words for ice – for obvious survival reasons they have had to make subtle distinctions about something that we only need one word for. I've never needed salt-bush in my life, so it is invisible to me.

This different way of viewing things extends to animals as well.

Living behind a Milk Bar when we were growing up as we did, we never had the space for pets, and so animals have largely remained a mystery to me. Even though I generally like Jude's animals, whose quirks and individual differences she knows intimately, I have to confess that sometimes I find it hard to tell them apart – even the males from the females on occasion. And I'm nervy around them. So I'd never really describe myself as 'an animal person'.

But there are many city dwellers who feel very differently; they are devoted to their 'pets'. In fact that word says it all really. With very few exceptions, like dogs guiding people with sight impairment and horses pulling tourist carriages, you won't come across many working animals in towns. City animals are there for company or for decoration or as child substitutes.

Paris Hilton's tiny pup, Tinkerbelle, obviously meets all those needs for her mistress. Just like the heiress herself, Tinkerbelle has been born with a silver spoon in her mouth. The pooch won't touch anything but gourmet bottled water, poured from a crystal-studded bottle, and never dirties her paws on the side walks but travels everywhere in Paris' hand bag. Apparently it's not uncommon to

see Paris and her pals in cool New York restaurants, sitting on bar stools eating their lunch with their pooches on adjoining stools picking over their own plates of delectable hors d'oeuvres.

We can laugh. After all, what else would we expect from spoiled celebrities? But we can't laugh for long, because much closer to home, in fact in Port Melbourne, a restaurant has opened called My Dog Café. The café offers birthday parties, with party hats and birthday cakes and a menu featuring oxtail ragout and lamb shanks fricassee – all for the dogs of course. Their owners have to make do with much more modest fare.

And a new Melbourne doggie boutique franchise, called Puppy Phat – that's P H A T – is doing a booming trade in hoods emblazoned with slogans like 'Stud Muffin' and 'Von Bitch', personalised diamante collars, and a range of aromatherapy products designed 'to pamper tired and cracked paws'. There is also a phat deli where owners can buy handcrafted Italian dog biscotti and petit fours together with poo-chinos and puppa-lattes.

By contrast, many of Jude's animals, just like their owners, have a job to do. They are well cared for, without sentimentality, and look in the peak of good health. As far as I can tell, none of them is suffering from the 'separation anxiety' that afflicts an increasing number of their city cousins and for which psychological treatment, provided at great expense by professionals like Bark Busters, is the only answer.

In the country, there is more understanding of and respect for the contribution other species make to the general well being. And that is something many of us city dwellers have yet to learn. I have paid lip service for ages to the

notion that we share this planet with other species. But it is really only over the last few months since I started growing my own vegies that I have begun to understand that spiders' webs are not something to be dusted away in the garden, but something to welcome. Or that bees are not a pest, but necessary for fertilisation of my zucchini.

These are things, I'm sure, that most of you have known all your lives. Unfortunately, if you are used to collecting your dinner, wrapped in plastic on Styrofoam trays from the supermarket, you probably haven't a clue as to where it started its life in the first place or what was involved in its production.

Speaking of production, it's only really since I started WWOOFing for Jude (I am the number one – well ... the only - willing worker on her organic farm) that I realised how much sheer physical labour is involved in country life. I'm sure the mechanisation of farming has in some ways made things easier, but even so, what I've noticed is that country people are always on the go.

You can never have a day off – the animals don't know that it's Christmas or the Queen's Birthday. The sheer number of hours people put in never ceases to astonish me. Yet, after a big day of physical labour on Jude's farm (even when there are baby chicks cheeping in the cage outside my bedroom door) I always drift off instantly into the most refreshing sleep.

And I'm sure there's an explanation for this. There is a great San Franciscan activist called Rebecca Solnit, whose writings I'd recommend to you. In one of her books, with the fabulous title 'Wanderlust: a history of walking' she describes what she believes has become a huge problem for those of us who spend our lives in cities:

‘(the body of the city dweller) does not suffer under the elements, encounter other species, experience primal fear or much in the way of exhilaration, or strain its muscles...it doesn’t engage in physical endeavour or spend time out of doors. ..The (urban) body is a site of sensations, processes and desires rather than a source of action and production. Having been liberated from manual labour and located in the sensory deprivation chambers of apartments and offices, this body has nothing left but the erotic as a residue of what it means to be embodied. This passive body for which sexuality and biological function are the only signs of life is in fact not the universal human body but the white-collar urban body.’(p.28)

I’m sure that’s why, driving back to Melbourne after WWOOFing at Jude’s, though I’m likely to have pulled a muscle, my feet might be throbbing and I’ve probably caught a bit of sun, I always feel strong and relaxed, and the prospect of returning to my little office is not always welcome.

Every time I go to the country I learn something new, simply because things that are only just coming on to the radar in cities have been second nature in the country forever.

A good example of that is recycling. Country people have always recycled, in all sorts of ways, decades before it was known by that name, and now city dwellers are realising belatedly just how essential it is. Currently, cities consume 75% of the world’s resources and produce most of its waste. In the City of Yarra, where I live, it’s horrifying to think that 60% of purchased products end up in land fill within a mere six months.

In some parts of the world, waste has become such a problem that governments are having to legislate heavily to promote 'reducing, re-using and recycling'. In Japan, for example, where there is a critical shortage of landfill, computer manufacturers are obliged to take back and recycle all obsolete computers and more than 80% of Japan's TVs are now recycled.

Water wisdom is another example of something farming communities have developed over centuries that we city dwellers are only just beginning to acquire. Particularly since Stage 3 Water Restrictions came into force in the new year, Melbournians have become much more vigilant about water use. So much so, that local physiotherapists are treating an increasing number of people with a new condition - 'bucket back' - caused by carrying buckets of water from the bathroom to water the plants. And suddenly there is a months-long wait to purchase water tanks.

Water, or the lack of it, is, I realise, a much bigger issue in the country than this. Water is about life, and living in some parts of rural Australia has simply become impossible in recent decades because of drought. I've no doubt concern about water shortages has given everyone in this room sleepless nights. There is nothing I can add, except to say that awareness of the water crisis is finally trickling down into the cities, and concern is growing day by day.

Back to the city dwellers. More and more of us, encouraged by books like Jill Finnane's 'Lawns into Lunch: Growing Food in the City', are beginning to experiment with growing some, at least, of their own vegies. I loved Finnane's book, which details the tribulations and joys of 22 Sydney-siders as they embark on home food production. I immediately started tearing up my lawn and turning

it into a vegie patch, and it was only when I decided to lend the book to Jude that I realised it would have nothing to teach her, since she and her neighbours have been growing their own food forever.

Something crucial I have learned from my observation of country life is just how wonderfully some people respond in a crisis. That was most obvious during December's terrible bushfires. There were several things I saw in the news coverage that have stayed with me ever since.

There was a young volunteer fire fighter who declined to be interviewed by a news reporter because he didn't have time to stop and talk. I was impressed that, in this era of reality TV where young people are hanging out to be picked, this young man was prepared to sacrifice his fifteen minutes of fame for the greater good.

There were numerous images of red-eyed and grey-faced residents bunking down in country halls; and although facing the loss of everything they owned, they remained unstinting in their efforts to help neighbours and wildlife. I marvelled at the heroism of farmers turned fire fighters, facing walls of flames. All those qualities on which we Australians once prided ourselves – selflessness, mateship, community spirit - but secretly fear we have lost, obviously still exist in country Australia.

And I'm ashamed to say they seem to be sadly lacking in Melbourne. The one day when the power lines were cut by bushfires (near Benalla) and some suburbs were left without power for several hours, the messages that came across loudest in the media were all about our irritation with the fact that expert technology had let us down and 'whinging' about how the fires had

inconvenienced us. That's why I believe we have lots to learn from country people about how to respond to environmental disasters in a more stoical and community-spirited manner. Because there is no doubt that climate change is going to provide us with plenty of opportunities for practice.

Speaking of climate change – some futurists are adamant that to make the huge changes necessary to save our planet will require people making a complete mind shift, away from the 'big city' mentality. Those futurists argue that instead we need to start redesigning our highly urbanised global world into a 'multi-local society'. In essence, this means we should all be using local resources as much as possible and shopping close to home. Of course this is not news to country people who have always operated that way, and for whom the local community has always been a central focus.

In case I sound as if I am idealising country life, I should acknowledge that in the past country residents have made mistakes too – excessive clearing of land for farming and grazing, river degradation, overuse of chemicals and wasteful irrigation practices – have all been facts of life. Nevertheless I still believe rural culture has fundamental values to impart.

This mind shift the futurists are recommending could be challenging as we live in an increasingly urbanised world. In fact, the number of people living in cities globally has increased from 15% in 1900 to 50% in 2000 and it is predicted that this number will rise to 60% by 2025. And because Australia is the most highly urbanised country of all, city dwellers might find a transition to 'thinking locally' difficult to make. This is just one more area in which country Australia has wisdom and experience to impart to the rest of us.

On the global stage, country people are already leading the way in many different areas. The Kenyan environmental warrior, Wangari Maathai, made history as the first African woman to win the Nobel Peace Prize. Several years ago she organised the Green Belt Movement, where villagers planted millions of trees in Africa to promote sustainable development and human rights.

Vandana Shiva, the wonderful Indian activist, was alarmed when the multinational companies started patenting the numerous varieties of Indian rice, so that people had to pay to use their own grain. She earned her title ‘The Seedkeeper of India’ by joining millions of her fellows, mainly women, in collecting as many varieties of local seeds as they could find and registering them all in the names of local communities, thus beating the big companies at their own game.

An Indian guru, Yogi Sadhguru Jaggi Vasudev, has recently won a spot in the Guinness Book of Records by organising for 813, 226 trees to be planted in a single day – October 16 - in Tamil Nadu in the south of India. The ultimate goal is to plant 114 million saplings by 2016, increasing green cover in the region by 10%. The record attempt, called Project Green Hands, was only possible because of the whole hearted support of so many local rural people.

It is in the big cities with our consumerist, throw-away culture that most of the values that are destroying the world originate. It is in the country-side, despite the massive challenges posed by a dwindling water supply, that, I believe, most of the solutions will be found.

This is one town mouse who had grown to love the earthy smell of her barley corn and roots. Rather than high tailing it back to the city, I treasure my

time in the country. I try hard to soak up all the wisdom I find here to make changes in my own city life and hopefully to influence a few other town mice to do likewise.