

It's not just about madness - random anecdotes from an unconventional life of mishaps, close calls, lessons and adventure.

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There was one other incident that comes to mind when anyone talks about misunderstandings. I had taken a plane home from one of my contracts upon which an item had been stolen from my baggage. Thus for insurance purposes I was required to register it at the nearest police station. So I informed a rather slothful looking officer I was there to report a theft off an aeroplane, whereupon she looked half-wittedly at me and passed this request on to the rest of the staff who also started to grin. Enquiring as to what they thought was so funny; she confirmed I wanted to report a theft 'of' an aeroplane? 'That's what I said,' I answered, 'a theft 'off' an airliner.' 'Was it a big or a small one' she asked. 'What's the difference I replied, however if it makes you happy it was a Boeing and it occurred somewhere between Cape Town and Durban.' This was too much and the entire staff was now mesmerized. Did it belong to me and where did it go she enquired? 'Yes, what was appropriated is mine and how the hell do I know where it's vanished to', adding maybe it was one of the ground staff who pinched it. Whereupon I got even more smiles and looks that suggested I was in need of psychiatric help. 'Listen', I don't know what you people have been doing, drinking or smoking otherwise are bordering on the lunatic fringes of society but I am here to report a theft 'off' a plane as I will need a case number in order to replace what I lost.'



'So you own the aircraft' she asked again with a grin from ear to ear. The entire police station had now come to a standstill and members of the public and employees alike were listening intrigued. Now totally exasperated I replied, "Who cares whose plane it is, just give me a reference number, there are thefts 'off' aeroplanes every day." That's the first one she has heard about in her fifteen years of reporting and by the way how can you claim for an aeroplane if you don't own it' she somewhat cynically

answered. Concluding that the entire police station had gone mad or else this had to be some kind of media stunt where they attempt to infuriate one as much as possible, I summoned her superior. On arrival he was taken aside and consulted as to my request. A few seconds later he began to ask me questions pertaining to markings and was there passengers on board and if so have they also vanished? Convinced that the whole lot of them were entirely round the bend, I said, 'let's start again. I got on this plane, when I disembarked my camera was missing. Tell me what on earth has this got to do with whether it's a big, small, pink or yellow one?' 'So you didn't lose an aircraft he asked. For the hundredth time' I want to report a theft 'off' an aeroplane 'of' my camera, that's all.' A few hours later the penny dropped and I must admit looking back it had to have seemed a ludicrous request that could only have been hysterically humorous for those misinterpreting the words 'off' and 'of'. This also highlights the importance of clarity and that much discord in our contemporary world arises from ambiguity and blurred pronouncements, interpretations and expectations.

Some time back I returned from a kayak trip close to the source of the Nile. This is the longest river in the world, travelling more than 6500 kilometres up Africa until it exits into the Mediterranean near Cairo, Egypt and is certainly high on the list of some the most fascinating rivers I have ever paddled. It arises upstream from Lake Victoria, one of the largest lakes on this continent. So enormous in fact, it has its own tide and any water entering takes over twenty years before making its way out. From here it cascades through a hydroelectric scheme into the White Nile. (The Blue Nile, which is by no means blue, originates in Ethiopia, is shorter and joins its counterpart at Khartoum, Sudan). After the confluence it loses around a quarter of its volume due to evaporation, seepage and various agricultural practices. I was on this river one day, sitting in my boat hanging onto a branch photographing another kayaker, when I felt an extremely uncomfortable feeling inside my helmet and on my arms. Looking down I was startled to see that my entire limb was covered in a seething mass of black crawling ants which had originated out of the trees from their colony next to me.



Above-Surfing a wave on the White Nile

These insects had clearly taken exception to this larger-than-life intruder and had unanimously undertaken to eliminate it by attempting to over-enthusiastically ingest me. I was unmistakably under siege; my ears were on fire, my nostrils itched and my head which I couldn't access appeared on fire. So the only option was to capsize in order to try drown as many of these aggravations as possible. So I voluntarily inverted myself and canoe, holding my breath and hoping their need for air was considerably stronger than mine, thereby necessitating them hopefully vacating my body. After what seemed an eternity I rolled up, confident of at least glimpsing my original arm colour; however to no avail.

These bothersome ants now infuriated beyond all comprehension, continued to simply dash in all directions, biting everything in their way. The only alternative was to evacuate the area for a calmer stretch where any remaining steadfast could be evicted. Despite everything, a vast amount with clearly an advanced sense of survival had evaded this exercise and taken refuge inside the boat by migrating inwards. I had no option but to abandon ship and expel those which were scurrying around in an unmanageable frenzy. This blatant and unprovoked form of predation I will not forget in a hurry. My ears, arms and face continued to burn for the rest of the day as a reminder of the ferocious tiny black tree-dwelling organisms that brings misery and distress to anything entering their terrain.

This experience underscored the strength of collaboration where the cumulative effort of seemingly insignificant tasks has a miraculous outcome when focus and teamwork are attached towards a common cause. It also highlights the 'David and Goliath' chronicle and message where no matter the size or



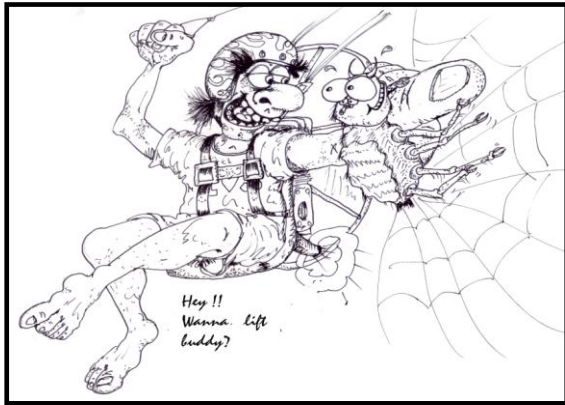
influence of an opposition, there usually is always a vulnerability that can be exploited.

High Flying Arachnids

-----Let's briefly depart from aqueous anecdotes to spidery encounters far above terra firma. I had taken off in my paraglider from a ridge high above a fairly hot and isolated area. Being a calm day we were relying entirely on thermals to remain airborne. I was on a distinct downward trajectory with the thought of a long blistering walk at the forefront of my mind, when I heard that delightful sound of the flight instrument indicating rising air. By this time I was circling no more than twenty metres off the ground, searching for the core of this evasive pocket of expanding air. I must have been on the perimeter as I was merely maintaining neutral ground, neither sinking nor ascending. After a while the tone increased, signifying I was drifting into the centre, allowing one to soar away from earth inside this bubble, subsequently arriving at cloud base in pleasantly refrigerated surroundings.

Time and again one notices birds circling and utilising this upsurge which not only assists in conserving energy but likewise provides food in the form of insects which are often trapped within this column of activity. At around 2500 feet I flew into another vortex of warm air. Initially the only sign it was there was a lot of dust, grass and other oddments that came drifting by. A second later and lo and behold, there before my very eyes was a spider's web, completely intact with the wide-eyed arachnid sitting comfortably and contentedly in the centre a few thousand feet above the ground. I watched it coast off into the haze and to this day wonder where it ended up, simply travelling along on through the atmosphere with absolutely not a care in the world.

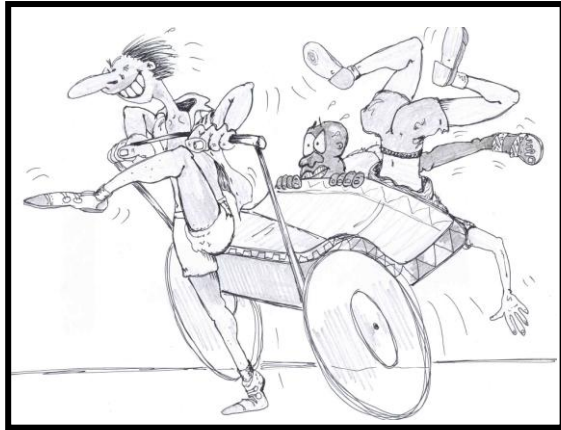
Wouldn't it be pleasant if life was as easy? The problem is that our requirements are considerably more complex than these lower order organisms. Our ability to reflect, conspire and innovate means we often become our own worst enemy by reacting to other people's



mannerisms, interpreted rudeness or other gestures we consider unacceptable. One needs intermittently to take a breath and determine whether it's worthwhile responding and if there are indeed unseen reasons driving someone to behave in such a manner. Perhaps a compassionate word in return may assist in mitigating whatever was bothering them and thus by doing so you have eased their burden and perchance even made a friend in the interim.

-----Those who have travelled to many Asian countries will be well aware of the term 'rickshaw'. This two-wheeled chariot is exceedingly popular with tourists and has been in operation following the colonisation and development of the coastal city of Durban since its establishment in 1825. In a similar manner customized car enthusiasts visibly enhance, modify and personalize their beloved possession, so the ricksha owner transforms and decorates this asset with zest and pride. The sides may be beaded, the wheels colourfully painted whereas the typical Zulu driver who runs up front, dressed in traditional battledress, epitomizes an ancient warrior in full fighting regalia. This encompasses traditional skins, spears, shields and feathered headgear. At intervals along the route he leaps into the air,

throwing the cart and all those seated backwards into space. A long extension with a small wheel protruding from the rear prevents the entire contraption and occupants from capsizing head over heels in confusion and disarray. Two of us were on our way to a local pub in the dock area one night when I thought 'what the hell, let's take a rickshaw'. After a brief dispute over the tariff we climbed into the back and settled down for an invigorating ride. However, half way into our journey the diminishing glycogen output from our coachman's liver at the helm was beginning to severely compromise his performance to a pace unacceptable for the available amount of imbibing hours remaining. So halting our charge I told him to relinquish his positing and take a seat alongside my buddy Mike, while I eagerly commandeered the running position and galloped off down the road pulling one black and one white traveller



nervously seated behind me. Every now and again I would try one of those vaults into mid air that leaves the chariot wheeling along on two spherical disks, the safety wheel screeching and me way above my passengers. The only indication that life was still in existence and a second commuter present were the whites of his eyes peering nervously forward. The amount of effort required regarding this activity is unbelievable and one has to view this vocation with admiration, respect and awe. So my advice to anyone wanting to try something different in their

lives is to give it a go. Don't worry too much what people think. They too are probably wishing the same but lack the courage to attempt an endeavour outside their comfort zone.

*Time spent laughing is time spent with the Gods.
Japanese proverb*

