

**29 February 2012**

**T**he world is changing, it's already 2012 and whatever people say will happen this year, SOMETHING will, and whatever that something is, the more spirit and love and light we have on the planet, the better prepared we will be for it.

**T**hings are gathering pace now, capitalism is floundering and political regimes round the world are being held to account where for centuries people wouldn't have dared to tread.

**T**his is not all fuelled by anger, it comes from inner change, awakening, people realising that there is a better life available to those with the awareness of the higher dimensions, not necessarily spiritually, just a better brighter way of doing things.

**B**ut in order to get there have we had centuries of 'light workers', religious leaders, sporting heroes, political icons (the Mandelas, not the Tony Blairs), the people who make life better, the people who give countless others more to live for. The people who take us forward. That is evolution, not biological but spiritual, it is how human souls get closer to God (however we choose to see Him).

**B**ut so too have we had the 'unknown unsung' people who touch us in our daily lives in ostensibly simpler ways, but ways that are just as powerful. These are the ones who bring the same light into the offices and schools that we all frequent, the ones without whom the ascension of humanity to a higher state of being simply could not happen.

**A**nd when their job is done, they go back into the light.

**26 February 2012**

The latest enduring round of silence has reached a new low, not in that I go another three weeks without saying anything, but in that the headline news of the week has been the procurement of a new batch of underpants. Exciting stuff.

But it goes deeper than just reporting a wardrobe full of new scrunts. The decent clothes shoppes here sell some great stuff, rather to the extent that after dombra playing and Kazakh speaking, shopping is my favourite pastime. But the trouble is, anything worn under things seems to be disproportionately expensive. You can get one pair of briefs for about \$10, simply ridiculous. I was nearing the stage where it was becoming a distinctly possible port of call, until today, when a chance trek into a shoppe looking for towels led me to a mountain of undies in the middle of the shop. Closer inspection revealed that they were John Lewis, presumably destined for the British outlets but ending up in Almaty, selling for an amazing 50p each. So the protracted saga of the increasing exposed elastic drawers to a close (pun intended) at last.

Further afield, I haven't finished reading Harpo Speaks yet. It's been an interesting read although not gripping as I'd hoped, and the most interested details are things I'd already read about on Wikipedia. This is not to paint a disappointing picture, the wider context these events are put in give them more meaning, and I feel I know the guy a lot better than I could by watching his films. Face it, a highly articulate, albeit uneducated, guy keeping silence (as Russians would say) on stage will inevitably distort his true personality somewhat, even allowing for the irony that as they say, he was very much the same in real life.

Of the three brothers (I was never a big fan of Zeppo) Harpo is the one whose contribution (his harp playing excepted) to their films is the most dated, largely since it revolved around the kind of antics people don't really find all that funny any more. The appeal of Groucho's wit will endure, methinks, for many moons to come yet, and the lovable comic pianist who was Chico is still as entertaining as for many decades.

I've been working 'part-time' (as they somehow managed to call it) for a few months now and keep track of my earnings. I can't disclose sums on air but the amount I've earned this month, a relatively quiet month, has been

more than in any month ever before in any job anywhere when on any salary. It's because we get paid by the hour which makes extra hours worth taking, the previously fixed salaries might have been lovingly referred to as full-time, but given their inflexibility it meant that any extra was not offered backed with much of an incentive. The new deal I have does have its risks, imagine for example we have a month with low student numbers and priority is given to full-time staff. But under any normal circumstances, I can earn twice as much, if I really want to.

I suppose I've managed to keep distantly abreast of the football, knowing that Crewe are playing steadily and improving slowly under the new manager, Steve Davis. The last few months I've noticed that the only reverses have come in the form of very narrow defeats against the top couple of sides, the momentum being very much towards the playoffs.

It's a shame that I suppose, Dario will never run the team in that way again, but he is getting on a bit and is still very much involved at the club. Steve Davis seems to be the right man for the job and some of his honesty has endeared him to me, whether or not it was his intention. He did a great job at Nantwich Town which for those of you who don't know, is a south Cheshire side which has won the Champions League five times in the last six years. It's top players are Eusebio and Stanley Matthews (only one of whom is overrated) and the main club sponsor is Supplement Publishing, run by the media magnate, Micky Ardern. They wear green shirts and some of the older supporters make jokes about them being a team of goalkeepers.

I bought a new phone. It's not worth blogging about, it's like all phones, a piece of junk. Only the same piece of junk would have cost 25,000 Tenge 18 months ago. I got this one for about 8,000. That's about thirty quid for those still using Sterling.

'Still' is an irony in waiting. Still using Sterling was a phrase we might have said five years ago anticipating a British adoption of the Euro. Now we'd say it without 'still'. Britain is using Sterling, and the continent is 'still' using the Euro. Not, however, for long. I look forward to the day very very very much.

## 21 February 2012

The end of my left index finger signals my arrival into the world of full musicians. This does not mean I am the finished product, but I nailed a definitive melody today which I can now play pretty much perfectly all the way through. The others I can play that well are not defining tunes of national significance, or if they are, I tend to slip up in certain areas. So far anyway. The aching sensation at the end of my first digit marks the spot, a two hour session and my first middle-aged regret kicks in... why didn't I start playing it when I was 8?

Well, I guess dombras and me being 8 were destined never to meet, and things, wont as they are to happen in the right sequence, are sitting quite pretty musically now, and I look forward to the next tune, once considered to be the apex of its kind, Saryarka.

For info, today's was Alatau.



THIS IS NOT ME

Had nothing else to say, this is my musical shout from the rooftops :)

## 13 February 2012

I heard it said once that one of the problems of modern man is that he (she, they, we etc) waste our lives trying to find things to do with the time we rush through life trying to save. It made sense, like a lot of the smart proverbs that have stood the test of time, some so wise they end up with their own entire Android applications available for speedy and free download onto your tablet thingies. I wonder how many people would honestly relate to this. I am not sure I do, literally, as I don't think I employ a lot of effort trying to save time.

But I fit the other side of the equation, quite readily admitting that I spend a lot of time wondering what to do with the time I have either saved, or simply have available to me.

Speaking as a teacher (albeit one officially considered a 'part-time' teacher) I always have something to do, and even if nothing quantifiable presents itself, what would be wrong with researching some new teaching techniques or finding some neat new materials for class? Sometimes I do this, I know. Yet across the gulf of space, a lot of my time does go on wondering what to do. The sad thing is, said reflection does not always boast a productive outcome.

Here are some things I should, and to use more constructive language, could, be doing. Some of them, I could have finished by now, quite comfortably. I could be:

- Learning to read music
- Taking back up bayan lessons
- Writing more for my website
- Learning to meditate
- Improving my Kazakh
- Improving my Russian
- Improving my Italian
- Making new friends
- Spending time with the friends I have
- Doing more useful exercise

I spend a lot of time in the gym, having gleaned suitable enough results to retain the motivation to keep working out. I also play my dombra quite a lot, although not as constructively as I could. But by now, at my age, surely I should have twigged that I'm not getting any younger and can't afford to waste hours like I regularly do. Knowing that it's 'normal' is not good enough, but I simply can't explain why I lack motivation.

When responsible for others, I do things immediately. I write a lot for clients and always meet their deadlines. I also teach quite long hours and always plan my lessons carefully. This is professional, no worries there. But I appeal to myself, from the bottom of whatever utensil frustration is kept in, to get my bl\*\*\*y finger out!!!

If you have any digit extraction tips, please please please let me have them.

Coming back to the idea of wisdom, and proverbs, I imagine I've said this before, but for me the greatest wit has to be that of Groucho Marx. Recently I've rediscovered a love for him and his brothers and regularly procrastinate on things that would benefit me more in front of one of their films. I also bought a few Marxian books recently, including the Harpo Speaks book, his autobiography. It hasn't arrived yet. I have to say, learning about them as people is as fascinating as observing them as entertainers, although one thing is bugging me... listening to my recently acquired audio of their music has upset my commitment to the dombra a little. Not in any significant way, but once or twice I have found myself playing air harp in a state of daydream, and even once air piano, as a Chico piano solo went through my mind.

I learned that Harpo inherited his first harp from his grandmother, and taught himself to play it. Apparently, he could not read music and it was not for a few years that he came to learn that he had tuned it wrongly. By then he had developed his own unique style and it was this that graced their films. He later on decided to learn how to play it properly and spent a small fortune hiring the best teachers, only for them to listen, spellbound, to the way he was already playing it.

I am paying my own small fortune to learn the dombra, and am trying to do it right, but the rebel in me reminds me that some of the greatest musicians, cricketers, golfers etc have actually done things away from the pages, so to speak. I think that rules are fine, but rule books? Surely they are just somebody's opinion as to what rules should be? Harpo was not the greatest harp player in history, indeed, check out Youtube for a girl called Erin Hill who is stunningly good. But with his unorthodox musicianship, added to his comic talent and humanity, he probably did more for the harp than anybody ever has and will. Even if he never learned how to tune it properly.

Chico would not rank so highly among pianists, largely because of the sheer number of competitors. But this doesn't stop him from being one of the most appreciated of them all. I guess not maybe today, your average geezer on the streets could not probably name him, let alone on a list of pianists, but some decades ago, for a spell, not many masters of the keys, pedals and strings would come even close to touching him in terms of public reverence.

Groucho, I believe, played the guitar, but never in any of the films and even big fans aren't aware of the fact.

His contribution was his genius.

A chance recent discovery reminded me of Egypt. The local supermarket sells carrot juice. I remember the Giza days when I would trek daily to the local juice bar for a glass of the orange nectar. I even bought a juicer to make my own, and then tons of carrots from the local shop. Until that is one day I had a bad glass. Carrot juice is great, but one of those things you never dare to touch again after you have some that's gone a bit off. Well, for 4 years I laid off, but the new stuff is a nice discovery, and I intend to buy more and more. Only, one bottle in Kazakhstan would buy a whole juice bar in Cairo, such is the differential in the cost of living.

23 January 2011

Bit odd I guess to be publishing the first blog of 2012 after I've already got used to saying 2012 at the beginning of speaking exams. It takes, I admit, a few weeks to get it spot on after a year of repeating 2011 a dozen times a week. Now I have a new centre number to contend with too, after the school officially opened a place in Astana complete with its own ID. As yet, however, not its own examiners, and I was lucky enough to be sent back north in the January cold to test another 40-odd candidates this weekend. (Note how I added the hyphen to avoid slandering them?)

Astana is the coldest capital city in the world, although a daunting minus 30 did little but disappoint. I was expecting pain, to fall to my knees in relief when I got back to the hotel and spend the evening scrambling round looking for a sauna somewhere. But no, it was quite comfortable, it didn't actually feel any different to minus 5, although I had made the effort to wrap up adequately when for the milder end of that spectrum I might not bother. Arguably, cold is at its most potent when yet humid, which means that the chill wraps itself round you. Dry cold is more tolerable because it doesn't really cling to you in the same way, and although I'd hate to be out in it wearing just a towel, in a decent coat, - 30 really isn't that bad.

I'm writing this on my netbook, the Compaq one I wrote about a while back. But in some ways it's taken a back seat as I have upgraded to a new Acer Iconia tablet, which although supposedly inferior to an iPad does just as much, and more, with thousands of free applications, for 75% the price. And, it's compatible with my other media. I bought it for work, and given its main drawback will restrict its use to just that. The downside is very apparent, this being the shockingly high EMF emissions, loosely I guess you'd call it radiation although scientists would be better placed to comment on this.

Put simply, if you're sensitive to electro-magnetic fields, you might want to consider if a tablet is a wise purchase, because coming from somebody who is and who has, it's actually uncomfortable to use. When connected to wifi it's like the air around me is vibrating, when in aeroplane mode it's considerably calmer but still pumps out electric pulses which science has proven to exist but solutions to which draw very little in the way of consensus.

It's a great item, seems to do everything and credit where it's due, how else can I watch The Marx Brothers on the train?

Actually, one of the free apps I've downloaded is a Groucho Marx soundboard, complete with many of his wittiest lines, space best given here to the admission that all of his wittiest lines would use up quite some memory, so the editor restricted himself to a mere selection. Many great thinkers we have quoted over the years, from Mae West to Eleanor Roosevelt, Oscar Wilde of course and Buddha, but to me there is no greater wit than that of Julius Henry 'Groucho' Marx.



Here

Since the New Year (incidentally, when Kazakhstanis refer to New Year as a festival, in English, they always call it 'Happy New Year', like, I went home to see my family at Happy New Year) I've enjoyed work a lot more than I have over recent months. I'm now employed as a part-time teacher, although the term is very misleading in that it implies part-time hours. What it means, is that I am paid by the hour rather than receiving a fixed salary.

Some months, conceivably I may work a little less since there is no contractual guarantee of hours, and similarly not of salary either, but the schools are busy, which gives me the potential to work independently yet earn considerably more. It's a risk, to a degree, but not a wild one and after so long in the city I feel I can look after myself. I can't and won't divulge sums, but the available payment for 'part-timers' exceeds not only that of the contracted teacher but also the accommodation allowance and miscellaneous other benefits.

Felt the need somewhat to get things moving in life a little, and have embarked upon yet another sensible eating programme, not one which should be taken to mean that I was eating badly but just in the wrong way (which I suppose is what 'badly' means, instead of that being about 'what' you eat). Nope, quality is OK, it's more a question of quantity and method. I won't go into detail, but try to imagine that Christmas afternoon feeling, when you've overeaten to some unfathomable degree... every day. Don't you think it might slow you down a bit? Little and often eludes me, it's a frightening alien concept and one I've struggled to take to in the past. But it has to be done.

Early results have seen me shift a load of lingering chores and rearrange my bedroom, not things you would readily connect to intake of food, but trust me, signs that the vitality is starting to shift inside. I plan to get this done sometime this week



Here

Speaking of exams, an exam board I will not name has taken it upon itself to do something I've always wanted to do and invent a new word. Instead of the time-honoured 'candidate' for person sitting an exam, they have decided to call them 'testees'. I think it's a load of bollocks, personally.

I've invented many words over the years, most of which are alternatives to out and out swearing, like 'beltocks' but one I invented quite young surely deserves its place in the daily vernacular. I remember the occasions as a child when I would not understand something, and was left having to admit it with the painful, telling expression of the same ilk, 'I don't understand'. Cue, theatrical shuddering gesture, chill-down-the-spine sort of thing.

Well, I felt that the opposite of understand was 'oversit', and of course logic would back me up on that, so when faced with a degree of confusion I was required to own up to, I simply told my teachers that (pardon the distortion of reported speech here) 'I oversit'. Of course, not oversitting was the usual scenario thus I did not have a reputation for levitating in class, but the word stuck in my mind and is now ready for a place in the OED.

Note, don't understand = oversit. Please don't spread this one wrongly, I 'don't oversit' would mean that you DO understand, lest you oversit me.

Ah well, nice to be back, but the letters are not flowing, inspiration has been hiding and waiteth duly for the impending surge of ideas as the internal 'chi' gets into gear.