

28 June 2011

I suppose I should confess from the start, I'm in one of those moods, one when it's not enough just to feel a bit down, but when there's that strange compulsion to intensify the mood somewhat.

So, in spite of being almost perfect (by my own judgement), I'm simply not good enough this week. I feel constantly annoyed with myself for this being single when I actually spend a lot of my free time trying to change things, which makes it even harder to know how to blame myself. It usually works that I go out with somebody who raves about me (even on Facebook), then go out with them again and after the evening stroll get an SMS saying how glad she is to have a friend like me, emphasis sitting very firmly on that five-letter word.

And so it happened late last week, leaving me at a loss as to what I might do next time. That makes me feel very bad about myself. I simply have no idea what it is these girls want. So the ten or so phone numbers sitting waiting to be used will have to wait a bit longer while I get my dignity back. A lot longer.

I have, for similar reasons, changed my mind about publishing the wedding video on this site. When I played my piece, the elation and relief kinda deceived me and I left with false memories of intricate performing and a hugely appreciative crowd. Perhaps half true, on each count, I really wasn't bad, but I don't think it does me justice. From being this talented musician who'd picked up a very precious instrument very quickly I now guess I'm just an Englishman who's picked up a few notes. And the applause was half impressed but half sympathetic... earlier in life this tinge of disappointment coupled with my current self-doubting would lead me to quit here and now, as it happens I will take a few days off and then redouble my efforts.

I was in the capital last week, Astana and have to report still liking the place very much. But the one gem that stands out above all the rest is the world's biggest tent, Khan Shatyr, the shopping centre unique in almost every way. Calling it a tent may seem quaint, but don't be deceived, it is a modern and very emblematic structure housing an array of very modern retail outlets (from which I purchased new garments on Saturday). Officially, it is a tent, covered by a suspended canopy and frequented by people wearing woggles (no, not really) but of pegs there are none, and of mini calor gas stoves there are also probably none, but you never know, they seem to sell everything else.

I changed my Facebook policy recently of not sending invitations of my own accord, and after finding a few former students was invited by a dozen or so more, all from the southern Italian region of Calabria. I'm not sure any of them (except Sam) have improved their English very much, and it seems none of them are still studying at that school, but most of them seem to be doing well, a couple playing for the local football team which won the championship this year. When I taught down there there was a little competition between my school and the football school, although I never remember it impacting on the school in any much way. Anyway, this is the place, it was nice to be there, as you can read, and in some ways I have missed it this week, but things change, and people move on.

These kids are not stupid, and although Italians can be excitable and often not the most studious, they do seem to get through their exams with as much success as any others. Yet they can study English for ten years and then not be able to speak it. Same in England, most kids leave school barely able to finish a coherent sentence in French in spite of having had four or five years contact with it. Yet, across the gulf of the steppes, minds not immeasurably superior to theirs regard their education with envious eyes, and slowly, and surely, draw their plans to study in England and get scholarships to boot. Kazakhstanis are not all trilingual, nor are many bilingual, and most don't really speak English, but those who want to

reach pretty much fluency level by the time they are 15. I did some end of course tests today and gave marks for the speaking section.

The best of them did those tests, not only comparably to how English kids of the same age would ever do a Russian test, but to a degree, as well as the latter would fare in that exact same test. Yes, in English!

I do have to admit that motivation is a fundamental part of language learning, as is necessity, although they vary from person to person. Given this, and that we know that the average Chorley comprehensive school student doesn't give two baguettes about learning French, it might be fair to say that this explains the differential. But we get that type too, one notorious student who I won't name is as demotivated as virtually any English kid in a French classroom, yet he speaks English, well. Even though he doesn't care, even though he doesn't try, even though he thinks it's so uncool. I received the French prize at school and left with a belief that I am a linguist. This kid, as a 14-year-old, speaks English about as well as I did French two years later.

I was pricing up new computers today in that this one I sit typing on here is behaving strangely and might be coughing its later splutters. Resume failures are its latest senility, and somehow deactivating my active desktop. I saw one very nice computer with a double touch screen system, perfect but for two things, cost, and the oddness of a flat virtual keyboard. I like the traditional keyboard with actual keys. I guess we can get used to things, and I sure wouldn't say no, but to pay that much for something when I get the same function on something I prefer anyway makes it a waste of. I will probably opt for a Samsung. When the old Toshiba decides it's had enough.

I was also pricing up hutches, I am thinking of breeding rabbits and then donating them to Mrs Wibblethwock's Rabbit Sanctuary when they get old enough. She lives on Cannock Chase.

Ah well, let's re-see how our hero Billy Ingham gets on with that twisted cross-pond bilstard going by the name of Waldron (de) Shirlington.

17 June 2011

Going through a phase of not hating Facebook, instead finding it quite useful as I have met a few interesting people there recently. But I find it terrible for searching for people. If you have an old friend called Honolulu Wakadu it's probably quite a good tool, but if you remember a lad from school called John Smith, the chances of finding him on Facebook are pretty slim.

A few old school friends came to mind recently, neither of whom I'll name, for no particular reason. Let's call them Bert and Ted. Bert was my friend for most of my childhood, and it'd be fair to say we did most things together. My grandad always used to call him Neville, which is wrong, nothing like Bert at all. Having failed on Facebook I was nudged towards its 'predecessor', Friends Reunited on which both Bert and Ted were to be found.

Bert replied to a message I left him and had clearly gone to the trouble of reading some of my site. I imagine he wonders what I look like now as I have stuck to my original decision not to put my photo on the site. I may in fact have changed the policy, but as yet no formal agreement has been reached.

It was nice to learn that said Bert is doing really well, and it was nice to learn how well life has turned out for him. I don't ask nor expect him to subscribe to my mailing list, but if he drops by every now and then, he'll very soon know more about dombras at the least.

No, not relevant as such.

Ted probably, at the time of writing, has no idea what a dombra is. He's probably preparing top meals for the healthy and wealthy somewhere in London, having always wanted to become a chef. I suppose if he changed his mind and completely lost his sense of direction in life, he's in some remote little known country teaching English somewhere, but I doubt it. Ted came from a Norfolk town to my sleeping Staffordshire village in about 1984 and left about four or five years later to go back to pretty much the same Norfolk town. I visited a few times but we grew apart, possibly prompted by my increasingly difficult personality.

Old friends come and go, others stick around, and one such friend of nearly two decades earns another mention with his latest hit, a song fit to grace his musical website, available via

and entitled My Love. I scan listened to it yesterday and it sounded good, which of course any Donald Simone song is going to be.

Another old friend is expecting to become a father soon, reassuring me at my age that it's not too late.

That might be it today, stand by for lashings of unbridled alphabet spillage over the coming days etc

13 June 2011

Being an Englishman abroad leaves you with a certain sense of suspicion, you know, that essence of rat permanently etched onto your philtrum. It comes in part from the number of times prices rise and people seem to think you will pay them regardless. The consequence is a certain indemnity against confidence tricks and attempts at deception by the likes of taxi drives and street traders offering anything but goods and services at fixed prices.

The flip side is that it leaves you with, well, a sense of suspicion. Every price starts to seem wrong. Many a day passes when I walk out of some store without a purchase because my nasal rodent detectors are nudged sewerwards causing me to flee an outbreak of retail Weil's Disease.

Sometimes in error!

Yesterday, I assumed that 20,000 Tenge for a solid dombra case was a rip off, and in good old fashioned British gentlemanly style stormed out of the shop, paranoia all ablaze. I mean, a local would only pay 10,000, wouldn't they? Actually no, the price was slightly inflated but I managed to get it for 18,000, which would be the price of a replacement instrument and in turn considerably less than the price of peace of mind as I otherwise carry it round in a flimsy bag.

So I bought it.

Quite unrelated, this morning, I was asked to play at another wedding, this time by a complete stranger. The hard case will come in handy if this becomes a habit.

Alarm bells are similarly ringing following some progress on the matter of the part time job I spoke of last month, about which I am now prepared to spill more beans. First up, I have to train to do the job. It has to do with correct posture, walking, psychology and confidence. Model school, no less. I have to say, I will go, and pay the money they are asking because I can afford it, but one might be left wondering... do young dreamers fall for their patter, their buttering up and pay the money to be left with no work?

Perhaps, and my healthy English sense of suspicion may come in handy as I know what my limits are, and will not let anyone lead me past them with wool down to my nose.

But I have to try, the money is barely more than a dombra case costs, approaching 40 this is not the sort of thing I can wait to do, I consider myself very lucky to even be in with a chance at my age. In any case, just the offer has done my confidence a world of good. What value would I put on that?

I get accused a lot of not listening to people. Obviously there's some truth in it or it wouldn't be said. But sometimes I think people have ambitious definitions for the word 'listen'. I know there's a difference between 'to hear' and 'to listen' and sometimes I do neither, but the stage they seem to want to take 'listen' to involves somewhat more, methinks.

Let me explain. I hear you, I know what words you said. I listen to you, I know what words you said and I understand them, I know how to respond to you and the conversation can move forward.

But sometimes people say I don't listen even though I do both of these things. Why? Because they want me to agree with them, to change my opinion forthwith after they give me theirs. They want me to take their advice.

It may be good advice, but that's not the point. Take an example. A man drinks a lot, his wife is worried it's getting out of control, so she tells him not to drink any more. He hears her, he listens to her, he understands, he agrees, but he doesn't stop drinking. Does this mean that this man 'did not listen'?

No. It means simply that he doesn't assimilate the other persons ideas. Listening does not mean you give yourself totally, it really only means that a person is prepared to assimilate the words that convey those ideas, if only for a moment. In 'not listening', as people put it, I would argue that in fact I have listened, but quite often I don't want to do what they told me to.

Sometimes in a conversation I don't listen to the end. Something that the other person says triggers something inside me and becomes the next thing I want to say, and I simply wait for my cue to say it. Other times, I daydream and barely even hear. If people are referring to this when they say I don't listen, then they are right. But if they are objecting to the fact that I don't, on hearing their words, become exactly the way they want me to be, then I am sorry to have them know that it is more perhaps because I don't agree, rather than don't listen.

What was that you said, now?

7 June 2011

I'm listening to post match interviews with England players and have been able to prove the theory put to me recently that they record all such interviews on the 1st January and then broadcast over the year after games in which players perform so badly as not to be worthy of the interview fee.

Add to this a wikisqueaks document listing a series of vernacular available for footballers to use when they can't think of anything of their own. The revelations are shocking:

Kept plugging away

We get our knockers

Game of two halves

Not in the starting eleven

Disappointed for the fans

Get a couple of goals

You know

You know

You know

You know

Not perhaps that shocking. Shock implies surprise. The only surprise I seem to remember getting from listening to a footballer interviewed was some Stoke player, name escapes me, who resounded intelligence to the extent that he seemed smug. Not his intention. Kitson, was it? Ginger, Stoke player, signed from Reading, played their first season in the Prem but has not featured since, has maybe left.

Ah, who cares?

On the subject of plugging away, about 6 months ago not long into my dombra playing career, I was very close to quitting, although I remember making it clear on the blogge that I wasn't intending to stop, so I won't start getting all melodramatic in retrospect. But I simply didn't like it, I could barely stand the sight of the thing hanging on my wardrobe knowing that the teacher was coming and I hadn't done my practice. Each time I picked it up I was sorely reminded of the gulf between the level I'd chanced to reach and the level I dreamed of being. It took a mountain of effort to agree to lessons, and once or twice I dishonestly cancelled claiming some excuse like twelve stubbed toes or a leg migraine. I even told him once that the dog had eaten my instrument.

And now I sit here pushing my touch typing skills to the limit knowing that although a blogge is due out, I have the same ten digits desperately yearning to get on the strings.

It makes a difference being able to reproduce something more melodic than the sound you'd make running your thumb over an elastic band stretched over a shatterproof ruler. I may try to play above my level, rather like an Intermediate English student trying to speak like an Advanced one, but when I collect myself and don't try to run ahead like Kurmangazy composing a difficult sequel to Saryarka, I make nice sounds that fill the room with Kazakhness.

On Friday night I did this in a very big room already full not only of Kazakhness but Kazakh people. 150 people, maybe, listened to a brave English dombraist scarcely out of instrumental nappies get through a famous and complex melody without any real snags. I did admittedly replay one bar while trying to remember the next one but it didn't break the tune, nor did getting my fingers caught at one point, and about 90 seconds later my composed ending led to rapturous applause like perhaps that suggesting Kazakhstan had won the World Cup.

It felt good. I have decided now to take it more seriously, take more lessons and maybe some exams somewhere. Not sure if they are available. England offers them in common instruments, you know, Grade 4 piano or the like, usually to school goers but also to others if they have the wherewithal. It'll motivate me to improve my quality if anything.

Travelling up to Astana for the wedding was fun, to a degree, although be reassured quite a significant degree. These 19 hour train rides always seem to be more fun on the outward leg, although the journey up does bring more doubts and consequently you ask more questions about who'll be travelling with you etc. I had great companions on the way there, a Kazakh boy of about 9 and his grandad. I played the dombra for them, of course. Coming back I was with a couple of Russians, nice but quiet, and the bloke by the time we arrived was dropping his guts something rather rotten. It drew a foul contrast with something I want to say about the outward ride.

About halfway up we arrived at a station in a town called Sary Shagan (no jokes now) which is on the far western shore of our beautiful Lake Balkash*. As at many stations the trains pull up and stop for a while, presumably driver break time, but also to keep local economies ticking over as local people hang out on the platforms and sell local produce to the people on the train. I suppose it pays to keep hold of your wallet, but not obsessively so. Anyway, at this station I think we spent the standard 15 minutes in a cool twilight with a gentle breeze coming in from the water. It was so peaceful. I mean, nobody forces you to buy bread. But they weren't just selling bread. Women were walking round brandishing huge fish on strings, with gaping holes where their eyes were (the fish that is). You can pick one out in the collage below, middle right, and while we're at it the picture second down on the left is of that very station at that very time. I took it from the carriage.

Life gives us moments, special moments. People often think of special on a macro level, and you can understand why, especially after a wedding as beautiful as Friday's. Mine is still, I admit, Italy winning the World Cup although I would hope it gets beaten one day. But special moments can play out on a micro level, the fleeting things many people wouldn't even notice. Just this relaxed being in the fresh air on a cool night in such a place under those circumstances was for me a moment to treasure.

We stopped there on the way back. The woman selling potato salad was nowhere to be seen.

*Lake Balkash is unique in that it is a half saltwater half freshwater lake. I'm not sure which half is which, but I suppose you might argue that the salty half is not the freshwater side. I'd be hard placed to disagree with you.