

24 April 2012

Last week the topic of my English Club in our school was humour and comedy. Part of the session involved showing a few comedy clips to the students for them to rate, and discuss to what extent they thought they were funny. Some of them weren't really the ticket, and some of them were not really clear enough to the lower level students who, for example, not knowing what the word 'dent' meant did not really 'get' the joke intended by the Father Ted sketch *Dent in the Car*.



[Here](#)

For the first time ever, Mr Bean was not voted the winner. Instead, the overwhelming favourite was, in spite of the audio being above most students' levels, this Monty Python sketch from I think the late 1960s.



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Nobody really got the jokes on a micro level, I mean, what was said, but the macro level was funny just for people seeing renowned philosophers ambling round a football pitch.

But I must admit, my favourite comedy is not my favourite because I find it essentially funny, but just because I find it strangely comforting

and occasionally watch the odd episode when I need that inner reassurance that despite my age, things are all well with the world, and just the way I left them. Open All Hours ran for the best part of a decade in the 1980s, fortunately without cast changes in spite of the rising fame of the actor David Jason. More than the script do the actors bring it to life, and for many British people not so much my age but a generation older, it has a somehow soothing effect.

At the end of every episode, Arkwright, the grocer, would be seen outside closing not only the shop but also the story with a brief monologue, culminating in some kind of punchline.

When I closed my shop tonight my soliloquy took quite some time to get through. No, not because I too have developed a stutter, but because of late, my life has got very much going.

Main news is the rather unanticipated move to a new flat, not for a few days but to a place I visited on Saturday which took about five seconds to win me over. The flat itself is OK, compact and very much adequate, in a nice area I know well not toooo far from where I work, and very close to where I go running. I should add, I've lived at various points near the usual running route and have moved further up it each time, any more of this and I'll be at the top of the course soon. But the views, oh my, the views. Sights never before seen by anybody other than residents at the back of this very apartment building, a panorama of some of the region's highest mountains and accompanying foothills. To see, is one thing. To wake up to, is worth the rent, actually one lower than that I pay now, albeit for a slightly smaller flat.

I have to move because Mr and Mrs Land are selling my current flat shortly and although they've offered me another one, the area did not appeal so I was left considering other choices. To be moving so soon was not the plan, but when we checked out



[this](#)

and saw the choices it made sense to take the flat there and then. Photos to follow.

There be more news afoot with fame being somewhat imminent, to what degree I do not know, but with a few forthcoming TV appearances and my participation in a Beeline (local Vodafone type company) promotion I am sure I will get noticed somehow. The former involves mainly music but will be conducted in Kazakh, the latter was purely linguistic but featured a little dombra music too. I admit to having allowed myself to consider more than the fact that it may merely be a minor feature on TV to be forgotten within the hour of broadcast, and have considered the necessary factors involved in getting an agent. Will not do so yet, quite simply because I am not being featured as a musician but as a novelty (object of curiosity) and I doubt very much people would want to pay to see me play, but if somebody somewhere decides I look OK on TV I would be happy to consider being so more than once.

As for the Beeline thing, that will be a Youtube promotion, one aimed at getting local people to learn Kazakh, in part by persuading them that if these Jonathon foreigners can do it then they sure can. Being there led me to make the (passing) acquaintance of an American girl who also speaks fluently. I had

expected not to enjoy meeting other ex-pats who'd got to top levels, but actually did in this case, not (OK, I admit it) because evidently I was a little better, but because she was in fact a very pleasant person to speak to, and obviously a friend of Kazakhstan.

Other audible frequencies wafting through the vineyards include the discovery of various places to consume sushi, one such serving a pot pourri of vegan sushi for a great price (in the 44th most expensive city in the world, I now know), the presence of a host of classes on my so-called part-time timetable, and the entry of a certain south Cheshire football team into the League Two playoffs. I feel that whether we go up this year or not, next year we will, given our new youthful and decent new manager, still backed by the wise Dario Gradi.

My writing venture is going well, although I have not attempted to spread the word too widely because I already have as much as I can do for the time being. Were I to get a lucrative deal money-wise I would reduce my teaching hours but the contract right now does not pay as much as teaching so it's not time to divert energy from one to the other. But it's a good job for the portfolio and there's plenty of scope to continue submitting.



[Here](#)

This is not one of mine, and if you surf further please note that not EVERY Kazakhstan sentence was written by me. If you read my blogge with any regularity (not that I write it with any regularity) you may identify my style and in turn know what I wrote, but there is one page that I would not want associating with. Not that the words are wrong, but they overuse hyphens and the text is disjointed as a result. Uzhas! The main focus at the moment is hotel and restaurant profiles of which there are many, sadly leaving me unable to get it done super swiftly but the site owners appreciate that, and at least I send them new submissions every day.

But last Friday I noticed a stinker!!! I had used the same word twice in one sentence!!! Not a preposition, article, nor irreplaceable word which I had modified / softened with a word such as 'said' or 'aforementioned'. No! I had used the word 'relaxation' TWICE within 18 words of itself. After seeing that, the aforementioned activity was not possible for quite some time!!!!

12 April 2012

Groucho tends to get more of the credit for wit, and in the contemporary world it is his contribution to the Marx Brothers' films that has more relevance. Yet for all his undoubted genius is there a line in the series of films not accredited to him that I would have to say was the best... an interaction between Chico and Harpo in their first film, The Cocoanuts in which the former laments his lack of money saying that, and I quote, "I would kill someone for money." Then on addressing Harpo he remarks, "I'd even kill you for money."

Then the guilt kicks in, and he retracts the statement. "No, you're my friend."

Then

"I'd kill you for nothing."

I've decided to eat more protein. This is not in the slightest to do with being a strict vegetarian, for indeed the best sources of total available proteins are not animal products. It's just that building muscle is centred around three approaches, training, rest and nutrition. I do OK with the first two, but I think the recommended protein intake for a bodybuilder my weight is a little over what I normally eat, so the middle shelf on the fridge is very much now tofu zone. Incidentally, tofu is the world's best source of available protein, which basically means that the protein is not only in the food but can be utilised by the body. I also like nuts, being them much of the time.

Work is going quite well with the travel agency now starting to publish my work on their site. I have a few outstanding assignments but am having a lazy day today writing merely for myself hoping to get close to the magical turns of phrase evident in the Billy books you by now have surely downloaded onto your e-readers.



[Here](#)

It's also running season again with the thaw opening up a few nice routes on the south side of the city. But disappointingly I learn they are not as far as I previously thought, with an amazing new discovery at



[Here](#)

Which is an online running log, one which actually allows you to trace routes on a satellite map and save them. Obviously this involves getting the distance, although you can disable the option if you are a runner more interested in just the pleasure of getting the trainers on and getting out. I was, and still am, but ticking boxes also appeals and storing a few routes on the system to click on is strangely motivating to me. But now I know that my fabled 7 mile run is in fact only 4.6. And my fabled 4.6 mile run is barely 3.

Like many things, running is psychological. You think you're running 5 miles, that's how you will feel. Knowing the distance is less makes the run tamer, and easier. But let's not forget, we are talking 4.6 miles of hill, and given that I come back on the straight downhill it means that most of the run, at least 3.5 miles of it, are far from horizontal in the less refreshing sense.

There's another dimension to this discovery. Having thought I was running further, and tiring accordingly, the new reality is that the places once a little too far away are now correspondingly accessible, making the Medeo 12 now just the Medeo 8. But like I said, 8 is not like you'd get in The Fens, this is southern Almaty and 8 miles from here begins the Tien Shan proper. I plan to get the bus back :) but in doing so that makes it all uphill, every last inch.

26 March 2012

The latest silence owes to a week I was fully determined to spend away from the PC (or any PC for that matter) most of which I spent with colleagues touring the deep south of the country. We based ourselves in



[Shymkent](#)

to celebrate



[Nauryz](#)

and took in other trips to



[Turkestan](#)

and



[Sauran](#)

where I took a range of photos and videos which are not available on the site yet. I took too many, that's why. Here's a collage depicting the overriding energies of the trip.

Naturally I couldn't leave the dombra at home so it too accompanied us, although I declined to buy another one with a flat bottom for the simple reason that I needed to be careful with the funds. This month, following 15 years of debt I finally paid the money I owed the UK bank, in full, and still had enough left for this trip.

The best thing, I feel, about the trips like this across Kazakhstan are the train rides, although I can't say I slept very well coming back and currently find myself thinking that the best I can offer to write tonight is the traditional TEXT COMING SOON.

On the subject of writing, the new business has made some early gains with a local couple who have bought a travel franchise needing quality English copy for their website, the Central Asian tab of



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for which I have made a good start by providing smooth prose for the main Kazakhstan page. It's not been published yet.

And more on the subject of writing, the latest Billy Ingham novel is available on Kindle



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I recommend it, it's not so expensive, although in truth I am being hasty, it would be better to read the books in the order in which they were published to get to know the characters and the background better, the first two not being on Kindle yet. Merry Christmas RIP is the best of the three and would be good as a stand-alone story because the events do not run in sequence with the previous stories. But the empathy I feel for the characters comes from the fact that I met them on Page 1 of book 1. Oh, and the fact that the writer is my uncle.

So as for not being the best writer in the world, well, I'm not even the best writer in my family.

4 March 2012

Writers are like boxers. Not that we go to press conferences and slap other writers in the face, or worse, but in that when you get good at your trade, you acquire, and nurture an arrogance that if challenged about you may fail to actually justify, yet never question. We writers believe, have to believe, that nobody can write as well as we do.

I openly admit to fostering this inner egotism. Now it may not be true, but I am not capable of doubting it. When I sit down to write, I own the English language. It obeys me and it loves me, does tricks for me that it would not for anybody else. This is not fact, nor disrespect to any other writer, but it is what initiates and completes my sentences, the knowing that every next word is divinely inspired, and totally incomparable.

But once upon a time I discovered that I was wrong.

It has to do with somebody who went to university at the same time as me and who edited the university magazine, a publication called Scan. This lad went by the name of Louis Barfe, the only contact my ever having had with him was a meaningless argument in a seminar on Popular Culture (???). But boy, could this lad write?! His editorials were about 300 words, and by the end of the first sentence it was plain that his was prose beyond all other. It just seemed to flow, was so engaging, informative, dynamic, powerful, yet soft and comfortable to read. But read it I couldn't, it was just so good and I couldn't handle it. No idea if he made it to be a top journalist, or indeed if he even wanted to, but if he did, I wouldn't be averse to checking out a few of his recent articles. Time for a quick google.

One of those times when I go through everything at home and look for things to ditch. First time ever, I've found nothing. It's not that I travel so light, I have to move house soon and have a ton of stuff to shift, so much so that I think the removal men might appreciate a few thousand Tenge from me, but everything in my flat, I need.

I used to hoard. Piles of old stuff awaiting reuse. Admittedly, occasionally, we do revisit erstwhile interests and want to listen to that old track again, even if only to discover we now hate it. Books that scarcely interested me previously I guess somehow hanging on to the hope that I would change my tastes (or hatred of reading). These days, I routinely clear out.

Letting go is a quality of autumn, although this is not in any serious danger of developing into an extensive explanation of Chinese medicine. For that, see



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Instead I remind you that some people let go more easily than others, of things, people, places, memories.

While previously I described my attitude to obsession, calling it mental obesity, consider also that we can also suffer from a kind of mental constipation, gruesome though it may sound. But surely it makes sense. We are energy, no more separate from cosmic energy than the cosmos itself, and it has taken cosmological evolution 8 billion years to make us what we are. It's impossible that we evolved external to the very essence of life itself. So in turn do we also represent the alteration in the cycle of energetic change, the taking in, refining, letting go, hibernating, gestating, giving birth etc.

So if we are made of energy, and this energy is the same as that of the world around us, then we change as do the seasons. But the catch is, we have become chronically imbalanced. Lao Tsu would like me for saying that. Our innate capacity to perform the functions represented by the phases I mentioned above has become distorted over centuries not living in adequate harmony with seasonal change. So when in autumn nature retreats, this is the same energetic change as that which happens in people, when we too let go of all that which we don't need. But in the same way as an autumn in which the leaves fail to fall, many people struggle to let go. There is no freedom of release, people cling to things.

On a physical level, this happens as I mentioned in ways a little too toilet to go into detail about. But mentally and spiritually, we fail to let go too. Hoarding is just one way it happens. But all the levels are linked together, so if you throw some of the old junk away, you might find it improves your health too. (Not a promise.)

Better still is give it away. I don't think there are charity shoppes in Kazakhstan, I leave things in bags by the bins. Sad to say, with all the Kazakh billions there are the odd few people who still rummage through the trash. Not as many as who do in most places, but a couple here and there. They probably find some decent stuff.

Rummaging through the bins is not something I've ever seen anybody doing in Italy, but this is not to say it doesn't happen. Cats!

Once when taking the rubbish out, I was warned by a local to watch out for cats. It didn't make masses of sense, I mean, I love cats, why should I watch out for them? Remaining curious, and mindful, I approached the bins to see that there weren't any cats anywhere. Pleasantly disappointing. But when I opened the lid, about five of them shot, and I mean 'shot' out barely within the reach of human vision. I was sure to thank the person who'd warned me of them later.

OK, well, unless said Mr Barfe contacts me now with a few tips, I've run out of quaint turns of phrase to go into interesting enough detail about my day discovering avocado sushi and overdoing it with the mustard, so I'll leave you all to consider these little quandaries:

How would you explain the difference between these pairs of items to a student who can make conversation about simple topics but struggles to sustain dialogue in any other area? I know, but it's my job to :)

In time and on time
Soup and stew
Transient and transitory
Rise and raise
Like and as
Pour and spill
Hard and hardly
Especially and specially
He has been and he has gone
I will call her and I am going to call her

And then the two classics... IELTS and TOEFL, and, British English and American English :)

3 March 2012

I suppose I qualify as a businessman, but what excites me more is being able to tell people when they ask, that I'm a writer. It's not that I don't want to say I'm a teacher, on the many occasions I've uttered it in response I have done so very proudly, but if truth be known the application of letters to spaces on page, be they screen or parchment, is a lot closer to home. The new website is not finished as such, and I am sorry to admit that the few days it's been live have seen it adorned with photos somewhat outside the reach of

copyright permission, but I'm on the case and plan to have a series of legal pictures to balance the succinct, non-repetitive copy that is intended to sell my services better.



[Here](#)

My work to date has been through an agency and it's a nice third income, but I've seen considerable scope for setting up on my own and a few pixels later, it's almost time to let loose the ink.

Sad to say I was advised not to run with the original photographs. I had gone for the vintage look with quill and ink, as well as a classic typewriter but it was suggested it may look like I was doing calligraphy. I disagreed, but accepted that people logging on may also experience a little niggling confusion as to what Zhazu actually offered. Shame, but as I said, the new photos may only run for a few days before I get some decent ones.

Spring is trying to come but has been fought back by the enduring winter. It is true what they say, that Almaty has four very distinct seasons, unlike Britain, in which seasons are mere samples. A few days of summer, few of spring and many uniform overcast grey skies. But this is not to say that the four seasons arrive on cue. Winter came quite late last year, the first snows not coming until mid-January. This time they came two months before that, and have hung around long enough to make the winter quite a markedly cold one. It's nice to have late snow for the skiing, but in the city the pavements can be quite icy and nobody seems to do very much to clear it. Walking is reasonably feasible, but running presents potential dangers in the obvious form of slip hazards which carry the twin risk of injury. I've hardly been for months, but twice have I got out and struggled round the familiar old course alongside the river.

I suppose calling it a river wouldn't clarify the meaning of the word adequately for an Elementary student of English, in that rivers technically move. And have water. The Little Almatinki River lives up to its name for much of the year it really only being a meltwater channel from April to about June, when even the highest peaks are relatively devoid of anything to actually melt. It's not doing much right now, although it still makes a nice walk / run up to the top of the city. I probably know that path better than anybody.

I'm covering a few groups for one of our more popular teachers. Generally, it's not a whopping challenge, my being experienced enough to respond to the needs of the students to have a classroom full of energy. But one or two of them haven't come. It's not that they come to one of my lessons and then disappear. It's that they don't even show up, because their lovely teacher is on holiday. (Lovely in Russian means that, and also favourite, which amuses me when men talk openly about their lovely football player etc.) What do people come to school for? I can understand that some teachers have that appeal and charisma that students get very attached to, but what's the logic in staying away from seven lessons because somebody else is teaching? Is it a centre of learning or a worshipping club?

If an entire group decides to have a week's break and wait for his / her return, this makes sense, momentum can be broken by cover teachers and students can in turn benefit from the short pause. But if the group is to continue, and some then decline to come, what is the possible benefit in that? It's not difficult to know why they like this guy, but they had never met him before they came to the school and had they had another teacher, they would be none the wiser.

I wonder if I feel suitably led to comment on the situation with various football teams in England, and I dare say Scotland. For the last 30 years, I doubt there's been a single month go by without one team in dire straits somehow, threatened with extinction, going into administration etc. Yet in that period probably only three league teams have suffered the ultimate fate, that I can think of: Aldershot, Maidstone and Scarborough. And to be honest I think two of them had lost their league status before they lost their entire status, by which token we can add Chester City to the list.

Other, such as Bournemouth, Notts County and Brighton have teetered very very close to the brink, but in each case have come back, sometimes much later, very strong, well run, and in the case of Brighton, not inconceivably heading for the Premiership sometime in the next few years. Something has always seemed to come along and save these clubs.

There is an argument that football is a business and therefore clubs not functioning profitably are rightfully destined to go into the dreaded administration, or worse. But while Stella's and Andy's Blue Sea (remember those?) were once small chip shops in competition with each other, Bournemouth and Brighton are actually, fundamentally, business partners. Football is highly competitive but unlike Andy's Blue Sea, which later became The Dancing Octopus after Stella's closed down (or was it vice versa?), clubs cannot afford to see their rival teams going out of business. Or they will have nobody to play.

So helping teams like Port Vale is in the interests of other clubs, but it doesn't make them likely to do it. I feel that sooner or later, the investment that is made in football will realise that other than in the top division, the money paid actually reaps very little in the way of payback. And so sooner or later, another

club will fold, this time a much bigger club. Then more, and more. Perhaps Rangers are too big a club not to keep going in some way, but who knows, maybe it will be the mighty who fall after all.

The Almaty team is coached, I believe, by John Gregory who was a successful, then less successful English manager in the 90s. Kairat, his current team, likely pay him handsomely but to achieve what I don't know. In Soviet times, for a spell, Kairat were in the top 6 of the erstwhile CCCP league, and now play nationally although how well I really don't know. Maybe I should check them out sometime. But to see them restored to former glories will take a little more than the skills of a manager who I would say is pretty much a short-term investment.

There are two types of manager in football, said short-term variety and those who will engineer a year-in year-out improvement in their club's fortunes. The former type will keep you up, get you promoted and then run out of ideas. The latter, may not keep you up, or get you promoted but will get you back up, or get you promoted in the end, and then keep you there. Or better. Sad to say, long term does not come much longer than 25 years, otherwise Crewe would be in the Premiership by now, something I firmly believe could have happened ten years ago but for one sale too many and the faltering magic of a very reliable manager.

Not John Gregory, by the way.