

TALE TOLD BY MY FATHER

(December 22, 2002)

I promised myself to record a story told by my late father. Between 45 and 50 years ago he recited it twice or thrice to the family. It remains unique not only because of its content, but also because I have heard it from no other storyteller.

However justifiably arrogant we may be today concerning information technology, and communication, and conservationism, there is tell - tale evidence from my father's recital, that we did not invent:

- *The concept of information as an important resource or asset.*
- *The knowledge of communication, without which the continuation of life itself is difficult to contemplate.*
- *The concept of conservation and sustainable development, which postulates that should we fail to protect our fauna and flora, we will lose part - and later all - of ourselves.*

The story can stand on it's own without further annotation except to say, (a), that my father went his way in 1983. It follows that any reference or simile to present day events is obviously my own. (b), "BBC Talking Movies" even now is reviewing an animated work called "The Wild Thornberries." I am advised that it has an aspect of similarity with my father's tale. I have not seen the movie, but I should very much like to interview its author.

It was more than a bush fire. The forest fire flamed fast and furious. A snake crawled up the stump of a tree in search of safety. But its efforts proved futile. A farmer noticed the danger. He found a stick and provided the snake with a bridge to safety.

The reptile told the man that he had nothing with which to repay his kindness. If he so wanted, however, it could bestow on him a gift - i.e., the capacity to communicate with all living creatures in the animal world.

The farmer opened his mouth, and the snake whistled a couple of times in his teeth. From henceforth, the snake assured him, he should be able to understand and converse with the animals.

There was one condition. The farmer was not to disclose the fact or source of that knowledge. It was to remain a secret infinitely more guarded than information classified for security of the United States against terrorism and the axis of evil. Any breech, however material or minor, would mean certain death for the farmer.

He soon ran into deep trouble; lots of it. But unlike Senator Trent Lott, he did not bring it upon himself. It began when a rooster, first in the pecking order, said something funny to a cock somewhat lower in the yard - fowl hierarchy. The incident evoked a little laugh from the peasant - proprietor.

His wife who had been watching intently asked why was he laughing. His response was not forthcoming, and that magnified her curiosity. Eventually, he had to advise her that he would die

should he ever disclose his secret - even to her. She had nothing to fear, he tried to reassure her. It had nothing to do with disclosure or lack of disclosure of weapons of mass destruction. He was no terrorist.

That did not evoke sympathy or understanding from his wife. Knowledge that he would face certain death did not quell her acquisitive or inquisitive instinct for the information that she craved. So, Lavabeau, which was his name, found himself busy in the bizarre activity of presiding over his own demise. His wife had no doubt whatsoever that she was willing to trade his life for knowledge of his secret.

He dug his grave, built his coffin, and said sad goodbyes - not necessarily in that order. Finally, he sat with his wife, ready to tell his secret. And to die.

But was he ready? Half in anguish, and half in concern for the animals, he delayed a little. How could he have forgotten to feed them that last time!

Lavabeau fetched some food. He served the cows; the goats and sheep; the pigs; the dog; and he cast the corn on the ground for the fowls. But the animals had noticed the day's proceedings with untold aggravation, intensity and sadness. They all refused to eat - save the rooster already identified.

He ate heartily until Common Dog growled at him with more than usual anger. "Our master has been kind and loving to all living things over the years, and especially to us all. He is about to die. Yet here you are eating as if you just invented grain and cannot wait to demonstrate to the world at large how sweet it is. You must be the most ungrateful of beast and man."

Lavabeau heard that and also listened to Rooster's retort.

"The master is a fool," Rooster said. "If he wants to die let him. I have many wives and one grain of corn. I feed all of them on it and in the end I swallow my own grain of corn. The master has one wife. Too bad if he allows her to control him. He knows now that she is prepared to commit murder, actual or constructive. His response should be such as would cause her to be buried in the very coffin that she has designed for him".

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