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To move with quick, gentle steps

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'What's that smell?'

My seven-year-old keeps asking this, from her middle-seat in the back of the inevitable family four-wheel-drive. No one knows what the smell is, or will admit to owning it. I like to think of it as the intangible odour of youth – a mixture of sweat, anxiety and optimism – it smells like 'what's next?', 'are we there yet?', or 'has anyone got phone coverage yet?' It is, more practically, the scent of clothes that haven't been washed recently, of food still uneaten from hours ago, of perfumes and colognes that haven't yet been grown into. It's also the scent of us – our family – the smells that mingle and collectively characterise our present while reminding us of our past, and hint of our future.

We've been in the car for a few hours already: my wife and I, our three children aged 16, 15 and seven. October school holidays. We are driving to the Northern Territory from our home in Adelaide. It's a considerable journey; the car is jam packed full of too many clothes (uncertain weather); lollies and muesli bars; long, gangly teenaged limbs; one over-excited smaller child; two overly-anxious parents. When the trip is done, we will have travelled 4500 kilometres having spent a total of 50 hours driving. We are on a mission of family bonding: time without the constant 'ping' of phones, the perspiration of everyday work, the tumult of domestic life.

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'Trip' *(noun; verb)*:

> *a journey in which you go somewhere, usually for a short time, and come back again; an occasion when you knock your foot against something and fall or lose your balance, or someone causes you to do this, when you are walking or running; an experience in which someone sees, hears, or feels things that do not exist as a result of taking an illegal drug; verb: to move with quick, gentle steps*. [1]

We have taken many trips as a family – through south-east Asia, the US, and Europe. The children now recognise our tolerance thresholds for too much phone time and my ability to withhold Wi-Fi passwords. My wife, D, has been planning this Northern Territory trip for a long time. She's the pragmatist. I'm the dreamer. After many years of prioritising international travel (holidays based around work conferences), D was insistent that it was time we see the heart of our own country. The timing felt right for so many reasons. But then,

> 'You are always travelling somewhere!'
>
> 'You are spoiling those kids of yours.'
>
> 'You guys have such a cushy life.'

We get this a lot from people. Sometimes, these comments (depending on their delivery) seem winsome; other times they weigh heavily on a mind already bursting with analogous fears and emotions. The stereotypes loom large.

Academics leave shitty carbon footprints.

Academics seem to go to a lot of "conferences".

Academics raise over-travelled, privileged children.

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I had an appreciably less mobile childhood than that of my own children. I spent most of my holidays fixed in my own backyard, and loungeroom, playing backyard tennis against the wall, reading books, sleepovers at friends' houses. The only time I travelled in my youth was when we immigrated to Australia. Once here, we ventured back to England only once, to close the door. This was not because life in Australia was happy, perhaps mostly just content. We travelled once to Queensland, and once ticked off the list, we never again travelled domestically during my childhood.

Watching other children go camping or visit family interstate was my childhood burden. But I had the wanderlust. I acquired travel magazines and with safety scissors roughly cut pictures of longed for locales, of distant places. With Clag glue pot gripped determinedly in small hands, I pasted them into my scrapbook and wrote stories about the people and places in the pictures. I wanted to visit the happiest place on Earth. I was pretty certain that I wasn't already there.

I was probably no different to any other self-pitying kid from a lower-socio-economic background wishing for California but ending up at the suburban pool. And it was not my parents' fault that travel, even done cheaply, wasn't for them. Travel is determined by class, but also by confidence or a sense of surety in the world that they never had.

I wanted my kids to have what I didn't. I wish I'd grown up with this sort of privilege. Our family trips prove – to others, to myself, more than to my kids – that I've moved up in the world, that I've made something of myself.

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Travel is thought to expand lives and minds; but we leave a lasting footprint on the Earth, and this was something we were increasingly self-conscious about in our 'driving holiday' to the Centre. Tourism is responsible for significant environmental degradation across the globe; but it is also (now) important for boosting local development and economies; it creates jobs and industries for workers. This is a problematic cycle that requires a mindful response.

Roughly nine million Australians travel overseas each year; and though many of these people might not have reflected on their carbon footprint, an increasing number of travellers are committing to more sustainable travel.[2] Strategies include off-setting your emissions, and being alert to the ways that travel might impact upon the local environment, economy, communities, and so forth.

There is much research to explore travelling ethically as a family.[3] Ethical travel is travel that supports sustainable, local development – for instance, consuming only local produce, supporting local businesses only, and generally, engaging only in the sorts of travel and tourist activities that the locals deem okay. The tempting forces of globalisation have made these values challenging for my children over the years. We suggest street food – they want burgers; we offer lassi – they gaze at the Starbucks across the street.

'Slow travel' has also become popular – decreasing the pace of travel (taking it slow, breathing in more, reducing stress, connecting with the natural environment, local foods and so forth). It is difficult to see an argument against this, though the opposite practices seem much more visible in reality.

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My children are the future of travel; it's in their blood now in ways it never was in mine. Their privilege, their experience comes with responsibilities. These reflections might begin now. I want my children to travel with minds and souls open to positive and sustaining relationships to people, cultures and environments. I'm sounding evangelical,

now, but I am a long-term believer in the value that personal documentation or life narrative can have on human behaviour. As a theorist and occasional practitioner, it is introspection, maybe also guilt, that's in my blood.

So, I ask my children to write, to document, to explore their own experiences, responses, engagements – whether physical, emotional, or spiritual – when they travel. I risk sounding too much like a teacher asking for recounts of 'what I did on my holidays'; this is often how these requests are received. But I also recognise the ethical risks in their not documenting the tread of their footprints, and the personal risks in their memory storage technologies and practices, and the possibility of obsolescence and memory loss.

My son suggests a family Instagram to collectively log our Territory trip. I am tempted. Surely we can become the next big social media sensation! Many families do this and some make small fortunes from doing so. In the twenty-first century, children and youth have emerged strongly, on social media and entertainment platforms such as Instagram and YouTube, as travel narrators, as children come to narrate the unfamiliar in a globalised and media-driven world.[4]

I am torn – between my desire to make them unplug, and my want to understand their very particular aspirations around self-documentation.

In our pre-travel family meetings, we discuss names for the potential Instagram account; my son conceptualises photographs. But time ticks by quickly and we inevitably commit to our own modes of logging our experience. The teens craft the perfect display and profile pics; they are constantly canvassing our opinions on their photo captions. They send Snapchats for days. D and I commit to logging our movements on Facebook (expected, of our generation) and to connect artistically with the landscape via Instagram. This leaves Miss Seven to sporadically log her journey – a mix of pen and paper scribblings and drawings – though she often got her hands on our phones and did bring a circa-2009, tiny digital camera through which she exercises excellent skill with lights and frames.

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Ten days; not as slow as we might have liked, but with four of us working, time in common has become as rare as a teenager without a social media addiction. As we planned, as we commenced this journey, nobody wanted to say it, but we all thought it: this could be our last road trip as a family. So, we needed memories; we needed nature, we needed locals to come to our party. Our stops: Coober Pedy, Alice Springs, Kings Canyon, Curtin Springs, Uluru, and Glendambo. Heat permitting, we planned long rambles in the exceptional desert, water holes, and the promise of Zooper Doopers at every stop.

The youngest and I share many things in common; perhaps the most unfortunate is our shared affliction of travel sickness. Maybe this is one of the reasons my parents didn't

like taking long car rides with me. Nausea is a strange trip, where you feel unmoored. Head spins; vomiting follows. D and I take proactive strategies: nausea bags at the ready, pressure-point bracelets, and a never-ending supply of crunchy ginger biscuits. My youngest is sick a lot on this trip; but it's not what will most often come to mind when I think of her on this adventure. I'll instead remember her singing loudly and making constant demands of my Spotify playlists. I'll remember her uncompromisingly cheerful face each morning when she asked what we would do that day. I'll only remember her unending zest for adventure. I'll remember because I am writing it down, now.

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You will see all kinds of lifeless creatures in the middle of the roads in the NT. Sometimes the roadkills are so fresh you can smell the death, even with the car windows up. Other animals are long-compacted, returning to the earth, but much slower than they deserve.

I do spend a lot of time reflecting on my own lapsed vegetarianism (regardless of location), but the roadkill in the Territory helped this along. An apparent over-population of native wild animals; vehicles, travelling at 130kph become a quick if not at all efficient machinery for culling. In beautiful contrast, one day we watched cars slow to a stop as a young farmer grazed hundreds of cows along on the road. The muted hum of the farmer's quad bike, the rhythmic snorts and grunts of the cows. That day we were reminded that slowing down has many tangible benefits.

No less upsetting is the number of abandoned cars. The cars were confusing, and troubling for what they revealed about our neglect of our landscape, a willingness to treat our most treasured environment as a dumping ground. The cars were various makes and models; there was no pattern. The cars were in diverse states of rustiness and decay. Some appeared very recently abandoned. I felt unsettled by the symbolism – of beauty being affected by external forces; splendour left to crumble, to fall apart. The cars shouldn't be here and their presence starts to feel as mundane as the roadkill.

After a while, from my front passenger seat, I begin to take photographs of these cars. I create a different narrative for each: one might have been abandoned by backpackers who were eventually picked up by a bus full of fellow backpackers and travelled happily ever after. Another, left after a lovers' quarrel – a failed proposal? (but whatever happened to the lovers?). A pair of purple undies flapping in the breeze, fixed to a roadside marker offered a clue for my creativity. And perhaps others broke down because they simply weren't fit for the unforgiving Territorian terrain. We will never know.

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We listen to a lot of crime podcasts to fill the driving time; "Australian True Crime" with Meshel Laurie recounts cases such as the backpacker killer Ivan Millat and another explores a case of children murdering their parents. We are feeling the full Australian Gothic when a voice rings out from the backseat:

> 'If you murdered someone out here and buried the body, you'd never get caught.'
>
> It is our eldest daughter. Were the podcasts giving her ideas?

My wife:

> 'Well, out here, you'd have to buy petrol and then this would be a record that you'd been here. There would also be video footage at the petrol stops. So, you'd be a suspect.'

A good 30 minutes of silence pass. We keep listening to the podcasts. The voice emerges again:

> 'What if you didn't stop for petrol? What if you had jerry cans?'
>
> We sleep with our eyes open the next two nights.

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A ramble in Kings Canyon makes you very conscious of your position on earth. The six-kilometre Canyon Walk circuit offers an especially steep terrain to commence (around 1000 steps, complete with hand rail). The remainder of the walk offers fewer challenges but promises a sustained psychological trip – a feeling of having left Earth. With viewpoints such as "The Lost City" and "The Garden of Eden", the mixed colours of red earth, the immeasurable caverns, peculiar rock formations, sheer cliff faces and lookouts – it is easy to feel as though you have entered an ancient city, or travelled to a moon or planet.

The lad ventures off in front at a rapid pace (his level of fitness often exceeds his desire to stop and smell the wildflowers). We don't see him again until we reached a water hole at the end of the walk. We worry that he had walked so fast, he might have forgotten to stop and look, and to take photographs. As we sit by the waterhole, he shows us the many photos he had taken. These are vividly coloured, impossibly-shaped rock-formations; limitless red canyons ('it's just like *Westworld*', he enthused). There are inevitably many photos of the lad posing – taking leaps off rocks, lying dangerously at the edge of the precipice, claustrophobically crammed between rock faces, and, finally, shirtless next to the waterhole. It was probably better that we had let him take these adventures alone or else he would never have taken them.

Later, as we watch the three children play together at the waterhole, through the light and shadows of the trees, we watch the girl and the lad step from childhood to adulthood, lightly, with quick, gentle steps, like we had always hoped.

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Curtin Springs is a cattle station, petrol station, camp ground, pub, restaurant, paper mill, jewellery, and tourist hub, set over a million acres, about 80km from Uluru. Before you reach Curtin Springs, you will sight Mt. Conner, often mistaken for Uluru and, as a result, sometimes referred to as “Fooluru”. For many travellers, Curtin Springs is a place to refuel on the way to Uluru or beyond. We stay overnight and it turns out to be one of the most memorable evenings of the trip. This was due to the marvellous locals we meet and chat with that evening – most notably the great patriarch of Curtin Springs (Peter) who regaled us with stories of his and his family’s long history in the region. These were tales of manual labour at the frontiers, of uncertainty and adventure. Peter had been told to ‘get off the train here’ at 16 years old. He never looked back (because that wasn’t an option then). He had no choice but to face up to some complex cultural legacies and histories, as he worked towards reconciliation with the Indigenous peoples in the area. His most intense criticism was directed at government policies, and the focus on interventions. Peter is a live-and-let-live kind of guy.

As we eat the locally-sourced food (I convince myself it is ethical to eat culled kangaroo sausages), washed down with NT Draught, we reflect on the complex histories that brought us to the centre of Australia. Like Peter, I was a stranger in a strange land from a young age. Though a child’s choices are limited; our agency, as we grow, lies in acknowledging our colonial inheritances and facing up to the challenges of decolonisation.

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At the Uluru campsite we watch a quarrelling couple set up a tent (rather, it was a very large camper trailer, a complicated set-up, even for the hardiest of campers, but the tent symbol is important to the story). I remember a conversation from long-ago where a friend told me that she and her husband had to sell a tent that caused too many arguments when they were setting it up. She referred to the tent as the ‘divorce tent’. As we watch the couple yell at each other (louder, and louder… then the expletives commenced), all I could think of was the divorce tent. It was getting awkward. Of course, we try not to look but it’s impossible to look away when someone is putting on such a show. Their anger seems misplaced, set against such a picturesque landscape. There was also some trailer-backing involved, initially. I have long recognised this as a mettle tester. My wife gestures sympathetically, offering an eye for the trailer-backing; they said they’d be okay. After an hour, the rancour was gone; in its place, the clinking of beer bottles and the crumpling of chip packets. All was well – with them – just like us.

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The "Tourism Australia" website offers tips for buying Indigenous art. But they don't say anything about buying art on the side of the road, at roadhouses.

On our way out of Uluru we buy paintings from women selling art at the Erldunda Roadhouse – at the centre of the centre. One of the women explains that they weren't able to be there the same day every week because of transport issues, but when they did, they sold their work at the roadhouse galleries. Such roadhouse galleries are common in the Territory. The art is by local artists, produced in the area, and in purchasing the art, the proceeds go directly to the artist. The artist we meet explains that she was from the Pitjantjatjara community and the art she makes depicts the Seven Sisters Dreaming. We wanted to know more, but then, there were limits to what we could ever understand. We understand our privilege in meeting these artists. We reflect on the myriad ways we share life stories in Australia.

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Later, on the return leg, we stay overnight at Glendambo, South Australia. Glendambo is less than 600km from our home city of Adelaide; it's another popular stop, with a roadhouse, lively locals, and an outstanding country pub. On arrival, as I check in to our modest digs for the night, the teenagers hovered. They'd had no phone coverage for many hours and needed a Wi-Fi password right about now. I'd been advised that the Wi-Fi was down. They seek confirmation themselves. Of course, I had a track record of lying about this.

The absence of phones strips us all back, a little or a lot, depending on your level of addiction. That night in Glendambo the children play pool and board games; they remember that they liked each other. As I watch them play I wonder how much longer they would play together like this. I hope for always, but know things were changing faster that I could grasp. D and I reflect on the road just travelled; 'the kids never look the same when we return. They always seem taller, broader.' We sit back in our chairs and sip beer, and just watch them. We wish ourselves home, while wanting to stay in this moment forever.

Notes

1. *Cambridge Dictionary* 2019

2. See Saletta 2014.

3. For instance, many there are many 'listicles' (such as this one: https://www.huffpost.com/entry/7-reasons-why-travel-is-never-wasted-on-young-kids_b_5871fec7e4b08052400ee36f) to explore the benefits of family travel; and also scholarly reviews such as Stone & Petrick 2013; and Durko & Petrick 2016. There is a similar volume of research on the ethics of travel in relation to environmental and cultural issues, for instance, Gmelch

& Kaul 2018; and Lovelock & Lovelock 2013. There is a rise in ethical travel agencies, and popular-press articles on sustainable approaches to travel, for instance, the *Guardian*'s selection of articles, https://www.theguardian.com/travel/ethical-holidays, and Matilda Edwards's "How to Travel Ethically" 1 May 2015 https://awol.junkee.com/how-to-travel-ethically/6984.

4. For instance, website Family Traveller has a writing competition for young travel writers: https://familytraveller.com/young-travel-writers/young-travel-writers-2015/; the YouTube channel Funnel Vision often document their travels to theme parks and resorts in the Americas: https://www.youtube.com/channel/UC3FBdA2krgGmdGdqxqDjElA; and some of the most notable family travel bloggers are listed in https://blog.holidaylettings.co.uk/top-20-family-travel-bloggers-2016/.

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