

On the Road, Again: Lessons along the Way

John Lubans, Jr.

Recreational travel, a uniquely human activity, can expose us to unusual ways of looking at common problems. Those observations can trigger our rethinking why we do what we do. Travel can also lift us out of the cozy realm of the familiar and confront us with the discomfort of different views and life philosophies. Library staff, when expeditioning with me into the woods, were amused (bemused may be the better word) by my preference for rainy and blustery days. Invariably, in my experience, a bad weather day raised the challenge level and at day's end there was a larger sense of accomplishment.

The Road to Kata Tjuta, in photo 1, sings to me. It beckons me to adventure, the unknown, and the uncertain. Also known as the Olgas, Kata Tjuta is sacred ground of more than thirty rounded red domes among which to wander and to ponder.

John Naisbitt, who writes about anticipating the future, encourages us to “[m]ake uncertainty your friend.”¹ For Naisbitt, uncertainty is where creativity and productivity happen. Travel can provide that uncertainty, that setting a kilter of our world view to enlighten us with fresh perspectives.

My column is about a few triggering moments that stood out for me during a trip into Australia's Red Center—the outback and beyond. In my Australian cousin Peter's twin engine Beechcraft Baron, four of us (including Peter's wife, Chris, and my wife, Sheryl) flew inland about 2,000 miles—during a two-week journey—from Australia's east coast and then circled back following a northerly route, including a bit of Australia's uninhabited northernmost coastline.

“We Don't Climb.”

That's the headline on one of the Uluru–Kata Tjuta National Park Notes (2002), a two-sided colored sheet dedicated to why you, the visitor, should think twice



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Photo 1: On the road to Kata Tjuta (the Olgas), an Anangu sacred site, near Uluru in Australia's Northern Territory. (Photo by Peter Lubans, 2002. Used with permission.)

about climbing the iconic Uluru, the former Ayer's Rock.

Barbara Tjikatu, an Aboriginal land owner, is quoted: “If you worry about Aboriginal Law, then leave it, don't climb it. The chain is there if you want to climb it. You should think about (our heritage) life and society, and stay on the ground. Please don't climb.”

The sheet goes on to explain that the chain and track is on an ancestral sacred trail taken by the Mala tribe's males on their arrival at Uluru for native rituals.

This is an empathetic appeal to our better nature to decide whether we will or won't climb. Uluru is no longer the white man's Ayer's Rock. Its ownership has been returned to the native people. They could easily close the trail to the top. Why don't they?

The Anangu's approach to enforcing policy intrigued me. I thought about our library policy efforts, from the laughable Nancy Pearl librarian action figure's sieg heil “shush!” to getting books returned on time, discouraging food and drink in the library stacks, or to limiting users' Internet surfing for offensive—to passersby—sites.

I do know many of our policies are hardly successful—books come in late, people get loud, and people consume food and drink just about anywhere in the library building.

A story in *The Times* of London added a dimension to my thinking about how we enforce policies and how

the native owners of Uluru do. The newspaper reports on a recent scientific study that concluded: Our human “moral code is so ingrained that substituting it with formal regulation can lead to worse behavior.”² The study tracks how two day-care centers treated parents who were late in picking up their kids. One center fined tardy parents three dollars for each occurrence. Over time, this day-care center experienced an increase in latecomers. The other day-care provider reminded tardy parents about how their being late inconvenienced the teachers who had to stay late. There were no threats, no fines. This center saw no increase in late parents.

The study concludes that penalties and regulation “may crowd out the good behaviour that most people, most of the time, follow,” a theory expounded in Adam Smith’s 1759 book, *The Theory of Moral Sentiments*, in which he explains “it is in our own self interest to behave morally to each other.”³

What do we achieve with our fines for overdue books? Along with the burden of administrative costs, we often gain ill will. And, more to the point, books still come in late. Users have told me, like the day-care parents, they equate the overdue fine to a rental fee so they can keep the book as long as they need it, even when it has been requested by someone else. Given the option to pay a fine to justify antisocial behavior, the notion that all library users should share resources responsibly somehow becomes irrelevant.

Twice in my experience, a fine-free policy resulted in no upsurge in antisocial behavior—or overdue books. While I have little empirical proof, my guess is that we gained good will and probably less theft and other forms of vandalism that could easily be induced by resentment about fines.

As photo 2 shows, the native owners have not convinced everyone to stop climbing. Yet, observers say fewer people are climbing. At well over 1,000 feet tall and six miles around, climbing Uluru is not the sanitized theme park challenge some may think. The fierce southern hemisphere sun, even in autumnal May when I was there, glares down, heating the textured skin of the rock, dehydrating and wearing down even the most physically fit.

I wanted to, but I didn’t climb. Others scampered along the tailbone of this mammoth sleeping creature, up along Uluru’s arched back. Then, later in the day, they descended, clinging to the chain. Legs atremble, cramping from exhaustion, many sat down and scooted, like a dog with an itchy behind, too tired to care about appearances. The ignominious descent suggests Uluru is exacting a cost. Indeed, a few climbers die each year. Probably next time, those who survive, they won’t climb.

Mirage at 8,000 Feet

While in the copilot’s seat on our flight from Broken Hill to Uluru, I spotted a rock outcropping in the distance that looked like my mind’s image of Uluru. I signaled to Peter,

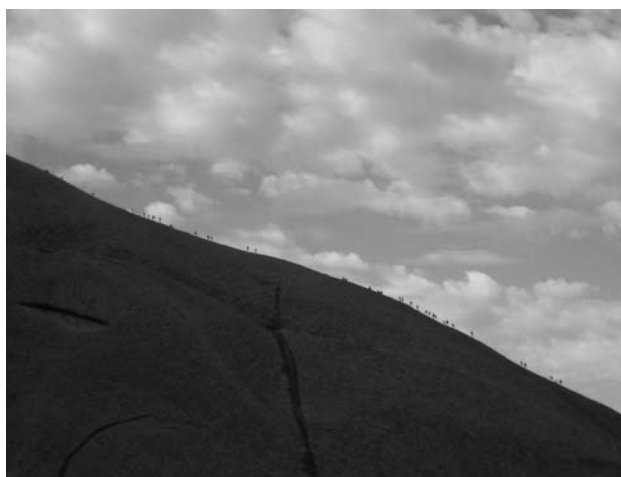


Photo 2: Like ants, people make their way up Uluru. (Photo by the author.)

our pilot, that it looked like we were there, sooner than we thought. Maybe a tail wind had pushed us along.

Still, the GPS device, clipped to the dashboard, showed our programmed track to Uluru veering off to the west, while my rock formation, looming on the horizon, was in the east. I was not alone in being convinced this was Uluru—Chris, Sheryl, and Peter pretty much agreed it just might be. As we looked for the landing strip, the GPS started to beep in alarm. For a few moments we ignored the GPS, convinced we were right. Peter, only momentarily persuaded, had second thoughts. He pulled out the aeronautical chart he’d prepared for this leg of the trip and confirmed that we had a way to go yet—Uluru was sixty miles to the northwest.

What I’d confused with Uluru was Mt. Connor, a crumbling mesa, unlike the rounded dome of Uluru. Others have made my mistake, have been taken in by this false Uluru. The erroneous sighting stands out for reminding me how easy it is to be convinced of something if we really want to be convinced.⁴

I’ve made library decisions with the same conviction that I believed Mt. Connor was Uluru, especially when there were others around me reinforcing my wrong assumptions and conclusions.

I recall a building renovation that resulted in a loss of usable square feet. We wanted a renovation so much that we opted to proceed with a severely reduced budget for the renovation. Somehow we were convinced that the renovated space, while smaller and with no new furniture, would be better and we could make it work. So instead of waiting for better budgetary times we charged decisively forward.

We’d managed to beguile ourselves that the result would be like the iconic Uluru and what we got was the ignoble Mt. Connor ruin. We should have, but, as happens in group think, did not ask ourselves: “Do we want to move stacks and books around, demolish walls and floors, and experience several months of noise, dust, and inaccessibil-

ity, while losing overall usable space?” No one challenged our thinking.

Mt. Connor also took me back two decades to Penobscot Bay on the Maine coast. There I was with ten other worn-out sailors in an open pulling boat one befogged, soggy night trying to get to a safe harbor. I was the captain for the day, and someone else, equally unqualified, was the navigator. It didn't matter that we had nautical charts and compasses, we wound up in the lighthouse's red zone—the reddish sweep of light where you do not want to be: certain destruction on rocky reefs in the frigid sea. At this point the instructor intervened. A few of us learned from that experience—it took me down a notch or two, which was probably the instructor's intent. The lesson has stayed with me—if you don't know, say so. Don't fake it. But I still believed Mt. Connor was Uluru. Like a colleague once told me, the popular view among some library directors that “leaders have vision, followers implement,” may be true, but so might “leaders have hallucinations, followers have doubts!”

“The Esteemed Order of the Brolga”

And sometimes the influence of travel—or is it the jet lag or the lingering effect of Australian wine?—can lead to fanciful ideas. Like awarding myself the “Esteemed Order of the Brolga.”

Throughout my Australian odyssey, I'd been looking for a souvenir pin, the sort you stick on your hat or shirt pocket: there were pins for koalas, kangaroos, wombats, emus, echidna, platypuses, and even a lyrebird but no brolga pins. Brolga bumper stickers, yes; brolga postcards, yes; brolga tea towels, yes; but no pins.

True, my motives for wanting the pin, while not disingenuous, were a bit capricious. I planned to wear it in my lapel at the next ALA meeting. And, when someone inquired, I'd smile mysteriously and relate how I had been admitted into the Esteemed Order of the Brolga, by the Northern Territory Library Association. I meant it to be a bit of a muted reverse psychology protest (What? Another award!) to the surfeit of existing ALA awards. I've come to believe that fewer awards have greater meaning for recipients. If we won't reduce the actual number of awards, then at least we can choose to make deserving awards every other year, or preferably less frequently. If you are under an obligation to give an award without fail each and every year there are times when you will honor the undeserving. In doing so, you dishonor the deserving.

Why the brolga?

The brolga is a large grey crane, with a loud trumpeting “garooo”—certainly an attention-getter at ALA council meetings or for greeting someone in the crowded exhibit hall.

Also, the brolga is named after a great Aboriginal dancer who was abducted by an evil spirit, to return in the form of a beautiful bird. This brolga myth is featured



Photo 3: A brolga out for a stroll in Australia's Northern Territory.⁵

at corroborees, in dance and song with brolga dancers taking long hopping steps and seemingly to float on the air, a lovely image.

The clincher for me was the fact that brolgas are known to fly to high altitudes to escape hot air.

I can see members of the Esteemed Order as a hardy lot of librarians who prefer action over talk and are able to soar metaphorically above the intoxicating clouds of inaction.

I'm still looking for that pin.

References and Notes

1. A. J. Vogl, “The Future Is Now: Interview with John Naisbitt,” *The Conference Board Review*, 44, no. 5 (Sept./Oct. 2006): 56.
2. Anjana Ahuja, “After More than 200 Years, Science Admits It: Adam Smith Was Right,” *Science Notebook*, *The Times*, March 27, 2006.
3. For example, seen on a NYC bus in March 2006: The first few seats, each labeled with “Please won't you [the “o” in “you” is heart-shaped] give this seat to the elderly or disabled?” This approach probably works better—it certainly feels better—than the regulatory and non-empathetic “Seat reserved for the handicapped.” Or, what alternatives might Smith (or Barbara Tjikatu) have to offer the Maplewood (N.J.) Public Library and its problem with fractious middle schoolers? See the story about Maplewood's extreme enforcement measures as related by Tina Kelley in “Lock the Library! Rowdy Students Are Taking Over,” *The New York Times*, www.nytimes.com/2007/01/02/nyregion/02library.html?_r=1&oref=slogin (accessed Jan. 3, 2007).
4. For a glimpse of Mt. Connor—the false Uluru—take a look at www.furry.org.au/hiho/misc_stuff/album/chapter04/0411.html (accessed Dec. 19, 2006).
5. Photograph by Paul Thomsen (wildfoto.com.au), 2006. Released into the public domain. Available at <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Image:Brolga1.jpg> (accessed Dec. 19, 2006).