

Do You Follow My Thread?



Have you ever become aware of the way your personal history hoists itself into the present in a series of time-elapsd snippets from the past? Often there is no obvious connection between the memories save, perhaps, the subtle inflection of an inner word which reels in a surprising new catch; like a fisherman who caught a minnow which then snagged a trout. But the memories come anyway, strung together like pearls on the necklace of your lifeline. Whatever and whoever *you* are, these associations form the garments that bedeck your *sense of self*.

It happened to me today. Two completely unrelated memories lifted themselves from the distant depths of my subconscious and demanded dusting down and attention.

The first was from circa 1952. I was five years old and in “High Infants” - the prelude to Primary School. “High Infants” was not to be confused with “Babies” which was peopled by inferior-aged children newly prised from the family nest and introduced to the Irish education system. “High Infants” was the lofty pinnacle of schooling in which 5- and 6-year-old boys and girls paraded their reading, writing and math skills under the tutelage of the nuns, before being segregated. Thereafter, the boys were sent to the Christian Brothers for Primary and Secondary learning.

All of the kids in my class were from poor families in the projects of Gurrabraher (fondly know as Grán - pronounced, Grawn) on the northern outskirts of Cork City. Once a week a nun would bring in a tray of Thompson's Buns smothered in frosting. We salivated as a group. However, we didn't *all* get a bun, in fact, only a select four or five kids got one; and the buns weren't given on the basis of academic prowess or polite behavior. They were allocated only to those who sat at the very end of the poverty spectrum.

In their infinite wisdom the teachers (for this happened in other classrooms also) knew which kids came from the *really, really* poor families, and these were the ones given the buns. The insanity of this gesture boggles the mind. How a bun a week was going to lift the child from poverty, or provide it with its recommended weekly caloric requirement, beats me. What it *did* do was mark out the truly impoverished families, allowing the rest of us to pity and, at the same time, envy them. We "ordinary-poor" kids were doubly displeased; firstly, that we came from poor families; and, secondly, that our families weren't quite poor enough to warrant a weekly Thompson's Bun. We were damned if we were and damned if we weren't. Never doubt the School System's ability to find a situation that it cannot worsen.

There you are! That was the first memory that washed up on the shore of my consciousness, as I sat in the passenger seat of my friends' car while we drove back from Zion National Park in Utah. Figure that out.

It was quickly chased by the second memory. See if you can find any connection.

It was 1973 and I was the headmaster of a Harambee (self-help) High School in a little village called Kipchimchim at the western end of the Rift Valley in Kenya. I was living among the Kalenjin peoples, the great runners of Kenya that gave the world Olympic champions like Ben Jipcho and Kip Keino.

One weekend, I fired up the old school bus; it was a Kombi VW van that comfortably seated about 10 passengers, but which was regularly pressed into accommodating 30 kids plus baggage. We were on our way to a two-day track meet near Njoro. As well as their cooking stuff and food, each student had a wafer-thin strip of foam that would serve as a mattress for the weekend.

We settled in for the night after a meal of Ugali (baked maize flour) and Mursik (the milk, blood and urine of the cow - much beloved of the Kalenjin peoples) and slept the sleep of the just under the equatorial, star-studded night sky.

Next day we competed with about 200 kids from all over the Rift Valley Province, while one person remained at the “campsite” to watch over the meager belongings. Somewhere in the middle of a highly exciting 1500-meter race, a gigantic dust devil formed itself, ex nihilo. It did a circuit of the track and headed off cross-country. And then, just as the bare-footed leaders were about to cross the finish line, in a time that would probably have edged out the European record for *professional* athletes, the sky to the west was suddenly filled with foam mattresses - hundreds of them. They spiraled about 200 feet into the air and raced off to the north. The meet ceased instantly as the kids and teachers, from 20 different schools, took off in pursuit.

Meanwhile, like the Israelites of old, Manna (or rather mattresses) from heaven began to rain down on the startled and very welcoming residents of the surrounding area. By the time the first athletes had caught up with the winded and spent dust devil, all the Manna had been harvested by the grateful Kikuyus of Njoro. There was a lot more room in the Kombi on the way home.

And then I was back, once more, in the Utah car and in 2013. I smiled to myself and whispered, “Ya Mungu, ni mengi!” (roughly translated from the Swahili as, “Ain’t God something else!”)

Namasté,

Tír na nÓg
July 2013

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Sean". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned to the right of the text "Namasté,".