

BUSYNESS AS USUAL



Observations of the Ordinary and
Extraordinary Activities of Mortals On Earth

PAPPA JOSEPH

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A SERIALIZED BOOK BY PAPPA JOSEPH

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PREFACE

People everywhere are so unconsciously busy in their daily activities that few step aside now and then to look at what's really happening on earth among its human denizens. If there were such beings as nonearthlings, they would find, in literally every mundane and extraordinary human endeavor they observe, the ridiculous, the incredible, the illogical, the intolerable, the comical, the confusing, the insane, and the oversane.

In this book are the amused and amazed commentaries of a keen earthfarer on the extraordinary spectacles espied in the ordinary activities of the busy human, and of the mysterious manifestations observed in his or her spontaneous responses to life's varied confronting situations.

Most of the writings are based on actual events which transpired directly before my eyes, or on true events narrated to me by people whose credibility I trust. Many are analogical scenarios woven with the silken threads yanked from the common tapestry of human aspirations and dreams. Some are allegorical, and a few even anagogic.

In the final observation of each activity which was so urgently, so busily, and so grandly accomplished by the mortals, I found nothing remained in the end but a profitless precipitate, or a toxic sediment, or at best some innocuous dregs that have settled quietly after all the hectic busyness, and upon whose surface I saw clearly etched the following commentary about my quest, transmitted from beyond the dark hole:

"When I determined to load up on wisdom and to see the business that is done on earth, I realized that if you keep your eyes open day and night without even blinking, you'll still never figure out the meaning of what God is doing on this earth. Search as hard as you like, you're not going to make sense of it. No matter how smart you are, you won't get to the bottom of it.." Solomon, Ecclesiastes

Pappa Joseph

How A Coffee Ban for Office Staff Saved An Agency From Closure

The boss's head seemed directly perched on his torso, for his neck was lost under his overlapping pink jowls. And, fittingly, he wore gold-rimmed spectacles. His hair had receded over the years from either side of the forehead and now stood in firm protest against further encroachment of the tonsorial desert at a point of perfect longitudinal symmetry to the back of the ears.

In other words, every inch of his head and body emanated the look and confidence of a shrewd corporate chief.

He had managed to convince his local sponsor into investing a few hundred thousand dollars in a new agency, and had personally supervised the furnishing of its office. He liked black and ordered lovely black leather couches for his suite. Even the transplanted tuft on the front portion of his pate was dyed black, although his natural hair was brown.

The first nine months he ran the office in true boss-like manner. Everybody, he insisted, was to address everybody with a mister before the first or last name. When some of the harder working staff began to repeatedly arrive a little late in the mornings, because they had been repeatedly working late into the night, he installed the latest timekeeping machine available in the market, which even printed a good fortune prediction alongside the punched time (no predictions, good or bad, were seen alongside the times of those over 15 minutes late). Every high and low employee, except the boss, had to stand in helpless submission before this machine twice a day, and use it to punch in and punch out, and, when no one was looking, punch on.

The machine lasted eight days. For some strange reason, since its appearance those harder working staff seemed to be as punctual in their leaving the office as in their arriving. At the stroke of 5 pm on the office clock, everyone dropped their pens, or fingers from the keyboards, stood up as if on cue, and walked to the punching machine.

After several days of perplexity observing the whole staff (except the office boy, who always had to stay back to lock the office after the boss leaves, which was always around 9 pm) queue up in front of the

timekeeper every evening at precisely the same time to punch out, it seemed to have dawned on him some faint light that the new device might perhaps be the culprit behind the recent reduction in the volume of actual work done in the office.

Anyway, after several failed attempts to regenerate employee enthusiasm and after the consequent several near attempts to split his precious tuft, he caved in to the silent revolt.

One year of operations was coming to a close, and the account books still looked dismal. The sponsor had given the boss a whole year of unlimited funds to prove himself, and the pressure was now mounting. About three months before the end of the fiscal year, the idea suddenly struck him that a possible cost cutting scrutiny into the office kitchen expenditure was probably the one remaining area he hadn't looked into in trying to salvage the company from closure.

The circular read: 'Please note that coffee will hereafter not be served any time in the office for staff, and is for the use of guests only. Staff, however, may help themselves to tea, subject to a limit of two cups in the morning and one cup in the evening.'

Surprisingly, not a syllable of a protest was heard from any coffee drinker, not even from Antoinette, our Lebanese secretary, a hardened caffeine addict. Instead, the next day, the office pantry was stocked with new bottles - Gold Café, Maxwell, Davidoff, Polson - each neatly labeled with the owner's name.

The sponsor of the agency, a highly sensible and educated Arab - a double doctorate holder from Harvard, we were told - came to the office on a rare visit shortly after the circular was issued. Sulemani was the sponsor's favorite beverage, but on that particular day he opted for coffee d' lait, and on that very day the last teaspoonful of Nescafe in the official coffee jar had already been consumed an hour before by an earlier guest.

The office boy came back to the boss' suite, and the dumb creature instead of going first to the accountant for some petty cash and rushing off to the nearest grocery...yes, instead of doing that, he said loudly to his boss,

'Sir, only Miss Anita's and Mr Cherian's and Miss Antoinette's and Mr Ashok's coffees are available, sir.'

And that was the precise moment the boss' coffee beans were spilt.

The sponsor got to hear the whole story of how coffee was expected to play a very substantive role in ensuring a favorable balance sheet. A couple of days later, he invited the boss to his office, and nothing is known to this day what actually transpired between them. But the boss came back to the office smiling, yea, smiling, and full of beans, contrary to all our expectations. He told us: 'I've been offered a new and important assignment, guys. And it's across the ocean. In Brazil.'

He couldn't even wait to accept a sincere farewell party from his staff. So greatly was the urgency of the assignment pressed upon him by the sponsor that three days after he announced his new job, he had left the country.

The sponsor brought in a new general manager. He wore no gold-rimmed spectacles and his hair was bushy and unkempt. But after another six months of operations, the company was in the black for the first time, and continued to be so for a few years more.

Seven years later, after most of us had left the agency, one of our old colleagues told me he had heard from an employee of the sponsor that the old boss was still somewhere in South America. It seemed he was a supervisor in some import-export company dealing in roasted coffea arabica seeds.



The Importance of Being Earnest in Spraying Your Artificial Plants

I met the doctor for the first time in the office of the boss I wrote about in the previous episode (the one who banned coffee for his staff). He represented the sponsor of the company I was working for in those days, and dropped in once a month for a firsthand look at how things were running in the agency. He didn't know peptic ulcer from peptic ulcer (suffered by cows whose feed was mixed with cola), but he was a good doctor of philosophy when it came to diagnosing the financial health of an organization.

The doctor philosophizes on every unjustified expense with profound statements such as, 'the unused side of office stationery is like the B side of life, or the flip side of a vinyl record - the best may not be on this side, but it's always filled, you know'. It was his way of reprimanding the staff for throwing away photocopy paper with only one side used.

He once invited me and a colleague to the brand new office our sponsor had given him only a few days earlier, which was located a few floors high in a prestigious building directly facing the city's scenic cornice.

On entering the office, we saw him in the act of zealously spraying a clump of artificial plants with floral scent from a can of air freshener. A little startled by our sudden presence, he sheepishly remarked something about neutralizing the odor coming from the garden below on the cornice. It was wintertime, and every office kept their windows open during the precious four months of nonstifling climate. We knew what he meant. Every few weeks or so, whole sections of the city effused an atmosphere very reminiscent of the blended aura around a perspiring jogger who had stepped on some pomeranian's poo on the home stretch. The municipality, as usual, had been faithfully making the rounds splattering every green patch in the desert-surrounded city with the putrefied but vital compost of life.

Now it was obvious the doctor took exceptional pride in his office. It was indeed richly furnished. He ordered fresh mango juice for us, and then switched on the special transmitter on his side desk that brought him the latest news simultaneously from the major financial markets of

the world. We were as impressed as he wanted us to be, and we left his office in a state of wow.

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Many months later, I had to go to the same office again, uninvited this time, to get a signature of approval from the doctor on a statement relating to the settlement of my dues from the company.

I peeped into his posh office. But it was not the beaming face I expected that was perched on the torso behind the desk, but that of a portly stranger who glared back at me. On timid inquiries, I was brusquely directed to another section of the floor, where I finally lighted upon my good philosopher, the doctor.

It was one of life's most humbling sights I ever remember of anyone.

The doctor was seated upon a swiveling typist's chair in a cubicle sardined by other cubicles occupied by junior accountants and clerks. His desk was not the red velvet surfaced one I had seen in his earlier office, but the kind normally given to fresh young office recruits...you know, the usual grayish blue or grayish brown metal stuff imported from some south-asian nation. And it didn't seem new either, for one side of it - the one facing the door - was dented, like somebody had given an angry kick on that spot with his boot.

I greeted the doctor who managed to conceal his embarrassment under a barrage of sincere queries about my future plans. Understandably, the meeting didn't last long. As I got up to leave, I caught sight of a clump of ornamental plants in a corner of the room - the very same ones I had seen him earnestly spraying with the freshener on my previous visit. A can of the same brand of freshener was standing on the windowsill beside the plants. Somehow, when he was evicted from that grand office for some reason I will never know, he had managed to take along with him at least his beloved plants.

The doctor might have noticed the momentary look of bemusement on my face.

'Life's like an artificial plant, you know', he remarked as I reached for the door knob. 'Give it all the care you can, and it still remains artificial and unfeeling.'

'Yes, I know what you mean', I said, trying my best to sound nonchalant and unaffected by his plight.

BUSYNESS AS USUAL

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It's five years now and I haven't seen the doctor since. Presumably he is still in the same building with the same plants for company.



Chicken Stricken in Arabia

In some parts of Arabia, you can get by without speaking a syllable of Arabic. In other places, woe to you if you cannot manage to have at least a surviving knowledge of the language. The latter was the case with six young Indians - one of whom was my childhood chum - who, after a four-hour ride from the airport on the back of a Toyota pickup, finally found themselves in a remote small town.

They were in another country for the first time in their lives, and there was excitement in the dusty air of their new surroundings.

To celebrate their new circumstances, they decided to roast a chicken, which they had heard was quite cheap in these parts of the world (back home in their village, they fatten a rooster for a year and then wait for some important guest to visit them before they get a chance to savor it).

The six friends entered a grocery shop and explored around a bit, fascinated by the incredible array of foreign goods on the shelves. But try as each of them did, they could not come across anything that resembled a chicken anywhere in the shop. And they weren't going to sleep that night without slurping on a chicken thigh at any cost.

An ancient bearded Arab sat at the counter. One of the friends went up to him and attempted, 'Chicken...chicken...where chicken?'

The ancient Arab looked up and muttered something in reply. It was obvious he had never once heard of 'chicken' in his entire honest life. Now two other friends came to the assistance of the first one. The second tried another language, which had worked with the Arab driver who had brought them to this remote desert land.

'Murgi...murgi...where murgi?' The shopkeeper had never heard of murgi either. By now all the rest of the friends were at the counter. One of them hit upon the idea of trying to convey to the old man the concept of a chicken. He raised his elbows sideways and then brought them down in rapid succession in imitation of a rooster flapping its wings.

The shopkeeper slowly heaved himself from his seat, walked to a corner of the shop, pulled out two bottles of Kimball's tomato sauce from the shelf, and handed them to the boys.

The six friends withdrew from the counter, made another concerted but futile attempt to find the fowl themselves, and regathered to work out another strategy with the old man. Then the most obvious solution hit all of them, almost simultaneously.

They rushed to the counter, and the patient old man looked up again.

'Cockarakooo!' crowed the first friend.

'Cockarakooo!' echoed the second.

'Where cockarakooo?' asked the third.

'Ahh!' there was a genuine look of relief on the old shopkeeper's face. For the first time since the boys entered the shop, his face beamed out a smile. He got out of his seat again, went to another corner of the shop, lifted a few boxes of cereals from the top of the previously concealed freezer, and hoisted a hefty chicken up to his customers.

'Dhajaja, dhajaja', he said.

'Dhajaja, dhajaja', chorused the boys gratefully.

When Robin, my old chum and the person who flapped his arms at the old man, narrated this incident to me, I asked him why the shopkeeper deduced tomato sauce from his action. He could never figure it himself either, and it remains one of my favorite mysteries to this day.



Friends and Komrades of Man

Back in my homeland, the usual solution to a feline population boom was to take two- and three-day olds for a swim in the sacred river nearby. When civic sense in that land reached some measure of maturity, the civic authorities banned the rivers and canals from being used as flush points for unwanted offspring - both two-footed and four-footed.

The only club for animals I had heard of in those days was the one our village elder used on the heads of mongrels hounding him. True, there was a vet or two in each district, but they were solely for the use of cows, nanny-goats and an occasional she-ass at the time of their birth pangs, or other pangs such as caused by consumption of poisonous tapioca leaves; only the vet then could save the animal. Anyone thinking of taking one's cat or cur to the doc would be laughed to derision by the village belles every time the animal lover was spotted in the village square.

Now here in this land, we have clubs, associations, and fellowships for felines, canines, asinines, turtles and other beings, and their joys and sorrows are given regular media coverage.

Feline Fellows, for instance, puts out a full centerspread advertisement in the leading newspaper every fortnight, and fills it with sorry tales and sorrowful mugs of forsaken Siamese twins and forlorn Persian quintuplets, to move the hearts of prospective foster parents. In healthy rivalry, another club, the Kanine Komrades, brings out a similar centerspread in another newspaper, but with portraits of mutts and other illegitimate issues of man's best comrade. The unusual spelling was at first thought to be some deliberate attempt to make the club name look chic, until we learned that the founder was from Austria and actually thought K was the right start, as it had the right sound, to both the names. It was too late to change the registered name, and so to this very day it is the Komrades who take care of Kanines in this club.

I first heard of Feline Fellows (which was later to play a poignant role in my life) from my first boss in this country, a buxom lady whose feline features always reminded me of the human kitten in the grisly film 'The Island of Dr Moreau'. Either because of a natural affinity or

out of genuine human compassion, she always stopped her car and picked up stray cats and took them home, and when the place was swamped to the rooftop with litter upon litter of the kittens, the more recent ones were shifted to Feline Fellows.

Part of my assigned responsibilities as a copywriter in those days was to visit the club and write on the state of each of the cats given for adoption by my lady boss. Week after week, month after month, sultry season after shivering season, I had to write copy on cats amidst cats jumping on my copy.

I couldn't complain, for jobs were scarce and I was reasonably well paid - but most of all, I didn't have the heart to tell my boss that all the kittens in her home and in the club and in the whole country meant to me no more than the amount of litter they extruded each morning.

Relief came when a new recruit began to accompany me to the club and seemed eager to do anything to gain a good standing with the boss. After his third visit, he was able to copycat my work and I made quick my escape.

Eight years later, my daughter, influenced by some feline fan, insisted on having a pet in the apartment. After one week of purring the matter incessantly in my ears, I relented, but on the strict condition that whatever she brings home should have been trained to litter in the right places, and she darted to Feline Fellows. She brought back two tiny black and white kittens. When my eyebrows raised on seeing them, the new foster parent reassured me that the club had given her the verbal certificate that they were either both males or both females. And following a close scrutiny of the anatomy, even with glasses on, I must admit the certification was valid enough.

The protrusions began to appear on one of them only three months later. By the fifth month, the now identifiable male had begun nibbling affectionately the female's cheeks and ears. By the sixth, we had to make them sleep in separate rooms. My sons were furious that I kept refusing to have at least the male ungendered, or as some prefer to say, neutered. Whatever the euphemism, I knew it was the same old knife job, and I have always been aghast at the thought of it, even if it's on someone else - an emotion further compounded by the memory of the Bobbitt¹ incident. (That lady has caused a universal phobia. The other day, my Lebanese barber friend, after hearing of my woes with the pets, confided to me that he momentarily got the

shivers when his wife once handed him a pair of scissors and asked him to 'bob it' a bit... pointing to her hair, of course.)

The cats are still with us, as I write this, and still unneutered.

We had considered filing a case against Feline Fellows, but then we felt they must have made a sincere mistake of observation, like I did. So, every love season we keep the cats separated. It's a painful sight to see the pleading look in their eyes. But the look of a cat deprived of its cathood is a more painful sight for me to bear, and so I continue month after month of playing the agonizing role of chastity keeper that I had seen played only once before - by the boarding master of my old co-ed school.

¹John Wayne Bobbitt and Lorena Bobbitt were an American couple, married on June 18, 1989, whose difficult relationship gained worldwide notoriety for an incident in 1993 when Lorena severed John's penis with a knife. The penis was subsequently surgically re-attached. *Wikipedia*



Monkeying In Arabia

My first visit to Al Ain in the United Arab Emirates remains etched in my memory for a language related incident. I took a cab from the taxi stand and said 'zoo' to the bearded driver, a fine brawny specimen of the Aryan genre from the upper end of the subcontinent.

Unfortunately I knew only two words of his language and those referred to the two honorable members of the human anatomy, which I had inadvertently learnt from an old mischief-loving roommate of mine when I asked him to teach me the polite way to greet someone in his language.

'Sooo? Kya Sooo?', asked the driver. I leaned back, foreseeing a difficult ride ahead.

'Sooo?' he asked again.

'Where they keep the animals, you know', I said.

'Kya?'

Obviously, he too understood only two words of my language.

'Elephants? Monkeys? Birds?', I tried again.

Now the cabman was getting impatient, and perhaps he was taking me in the opposite direction.

I tried some gesticulations, of an elephant swaying its trunk, of a bird flying, of a tiger snarling. The driver was not amused, and pulled over at the next taxi stop. I had to think, and think fast. I frantically made one last attempt. I extended my elbows ape-style and scratched the two sides of my belly with my hands.

The driver immediately changed gear, and direction.

'Ullukapatta', he muttered, without looking at me.

In just under five minutes I was at the zoo entrance.

I have deliberately forgotten the right way to pronounce the first two words I learnt in that language, but that word for monkey I am going to remember exactly as the driver pronounced it for the rest of my life, especially when I visit that zoo again.

MONKEYING IN ARABIA

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PS: Almost 12 years after I wrote of this incident, when my wife finally came to know about it, I was told, to my horror, that the name for monkey in Hindi was something else. It was simply my good fortune that I did not get a chance to visit that zoo again or ask any cabman to take me to where the ullukapattas are. In the native land of the cabdriver, 'son of an owl' is the equivalent epithet of 'dunce!'.



Is It A Smile or Is It A Snile?

There is a facial expression that comes on either as a reflex reaction or as a forced contraction of the muscles around one's jaws. One is the smile, a natural response; the other is the snile, a deliberate contraction. A snile is a snarl which for a brief duration is forced to assume the contours of a smile.

The smile springs up in happy spontaneity, such as when you encounter an old friend on the street who doesn't owe you any money. The jaw muscles hold on much longer if by chance you meet an elusive friend and he unexpectedly returns a good sum of money he had owed you for years. The smile also makes a spontaneous appearance at other sights that delight the owner's heart. That's the key - the heart. The beams of the smile are really the emanations of a brightened or lightened heart. It is at once recognized for its authenticity, and therefore reciprocated in kind in brimful and overflowing measure.

The snile is the biological offspring of the smile. But it's a bastard offspring begotten of brute circumstances. It's one purpose for existence is to deceive.

Infants have an uncanny ability to discern between the smile of genuine baby watchers and the similar expression of potential baby snatchers. If you snile at this, the next time you get the opportunity to stand close to a few months-old infant, look at him closely and give him your best grin, while thinking of giving him a little whack on his seat. (Girls at this age, or any age, are usually gullible in this matter - the conniving smile of a con lover, for example, is in their sight the purest expression of a man swept off his feet by his lady.) Observe closely how the child first rivets his eyeballs on yours, then how his features suddenly contort into an expression of horror, and... I suggest that at this stage you leave the cribside immediately. Then find another baby, keep your expression neutral, and think that making babies is a most beautiful experience, and let your heartfelt conviction break forth in its widest expression on your face. Ah, you will never forget that toothless smile in return.

Walk into a mega shop, and a saleswoman greets you with a smile. But sometimes - especially when a saleswoman is harried and underpaid - it could be a pretty mask for a nonverbal unwelcome:

'Here comes another oaf I have to serve.' With some practice, you can learn to discern the occasions you are genuinely wanted or genuinely unwanted in a place.

Salesmen, on the other hand, if they don't feel a smile, just don't smile. Nevertheless, I think in the case of male customers, even when they know that they are being served by a sniling lady, they would prefer that pretence any day than to be served by an efficient non smiling man. Not women, though, who would rather be attended to by a dumb non smiling salesman than by a competent sniling species of their own gender.

Air hostesses, with rare exceptions, have a double PhD in the art of sniling. Some of them have so refined this inflight protocol that they could dupe even an astute snile detector. Until a few years ago, everytime I walked by the galley of the plane to the ramp, I invariably had to walk past an upright lady posted near the exit, who would sweetly bid me 'Thank you, bye', or some other short niceties along that line. And often naively I had paused to greet back a heartfelt adieu. As soon I took my first step on the ramp, I could hear the rest of her sentence '...and good riddance!'. Of course, I didn't hear it verbally as she didn't utter it orally. But I could hear its vibes with a 5000 PMPO woofer effect on my nape.

Crafty businessmen exploit the fact that there are enough snile seekers on earth today to make them smile all the way to the bank. They employ innocent young ladies and train them well, among other skills, in the craft of assuming alluring facial contortions and the art of effusing deluding verbal concoctions. Nevertheless, for a few weeks even after this orientation many of the trainees greet customers with their homespun genuine smiles, until experience hardens them and sniling becomes more natural and less strenuous for them.

But during those precious few weeks of genuine emanations from the face, the warm vibes will elevate your shopping spirit and send you spinning on a buying spree.

Make the most of it, for on your next visit you may find that the snile has taken over and warm natural composure has given in to shallow cultivated comportment.

