



*Patterns
of Change*

*Eckart
Schumann*

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Dedication

To Strelza, Lyal, Beth, Grant, Robyn and Christopher

I am grateful to Cathy, Denise, Beth, Waldo and Ann for comments on the original manuscript. In particular, I would also like to thank Pat for her encouragement to continue.

*All characters in this publication are fictitious
and all resemblance to real persons, living or dead,
is purely coincidental.*

Chapter 1

Authority did not need facts. It was a truth that dawned on him slowly, and in retrospect he wondered at his early naivety. In his defense, his university training had taught him a wholly different approach to life, and it had taken him time to reconcile those ideas with the way authority functioned.

His lecturers had taught him to analyze and assess facts, and to reach conclusions based on careful deliberations. He had brought that enthusiasm into his postdoctoral studies, becoming part of a climate research group in California. It had been an exciting, stimulating time, and his group made what seemed to be fundamental discoveries, explaining issues that were at the forefront of the climate debate. He expected those in authority to use the results in their decision-making.

But nothing happened. It was as though there was no connection, no realization of what the team had found. It was as though they were working somewhere, and somewhere else authority and the world continued with their own existence. He watched policies being made with scant attention to facts. Prejudices, vested interests, money and corruption seemed to play a much greater role in defining management options than any rational decisions.

It was a salutary experience, especially when funding dried up and his group was told to look elsewhere for jobs.

Professor Amweiler had called them all together to explain that their grant had been terminated. “It seems we are not finding what is required,” he had said tersely, a trace of bitterness in his voice, “but there is nothing further that I can do. I’m sorry.”

That had been that. No job. He guessed he could have found another postdoctoral position somewhere in the USA, but it would have been more of the same. Interesting and stimulating work certainly, within a group of

like-minded scientists. Yet there was something missing, some relevance to the rest of society.

Paul sighed. He still wasn't sure if it had been a good decision to return home to South Africa, and leave that world of intellectual investigation behind him. However, he also wasn't prepared to admit that Laura had played a part in that decision.

He found research funding very limited in South Africa, even more so than when he had left four years earlier. The whole academic scene was also mired in politics, bureaucracy and racial quotas. He approached some universities for research positions, but found his expertise made departments wonder where he would fit in.

"Your CV is good, very good," he had been told, "but we can't really start something new with your specialties. We also can't appoint you in an academic post, because as you know we have to transform."

It was all very disappointing, being denied work in his own country because of the color of his skin. Yet somehow he felt at home: the flavor of the veldt, the beaches, the sea, and the wide open sky seemed so familiar that he wondered if there was any other part of the planet like it. He never really reached that stage of contentment in the States.

He gave himself three years to see if he could make a difference, to find out if he could contribute. It was a very vague sort of notion, and he wasn't quite sure how he would decide if he was being successful. Already more than half of his three years had gone by and he seemed to be stagnating.

He eventually took a position as an environmental officer for the South African Environmental Society, commonly known as SAES, based at regional headquarters in Port Elizabeth. As a kind of jack-of-all-trades, he thought it would be a good opportunity to experience the 'real world'. At the same time he maintained contact with colleagues all over the world, and initially spent time writing papers for publication. However, he was far away from the action, and was finding it more and more difficult to keep up to date.

He had completed courses in environmental law and process in his immediate postgraduate courses, and was now using that knowledge in everything he did. However, it brought little satisfaction, and if this was the real world then he was beginning to reach a stage where they could stick it. All he seemed to be doing was keeping a check on developers, without much authority at all, and with little support from those people with authority. Law was becoming more important than science, and he was spending all his time interpreting that flawed, imperfect creation of man, rather than deciphering the perfect work of God.

He breathed in deeply, almost sighing again as he breathed out. Well, he thought, at least he was in a beautiful place. Plettenberg Bay was a jewel on the South African south coast, with rocky cliffs interspersed with magnificent beaches, and the Tsitsikamma Mountains forming an imposing barrier not far inland.

However, it was specifically in places like this where problems arose, and unfortunately the scenery and the climate were attracting more and more people, and extravagant holiday houses were clogging up the hills behind him. There seemed to be little effort to regulate the way natural areas were being torn up to make way for more and more buildings. There had to be some limits, but the authorities cared little for the long-term effects of their actions.

It was another case of the same old thing. Short-term decisions that were based on expediency, and to hell with any potential effects based on facts and knowledge of the systems they were destroying. Things were changing with little thought for the future.

He was sitting on a bench at a small lookout site. The land fell away quite steeply in front of him, down to a small pocket beach littered with boulders and flanked by rocky outcrops. Beyond that the ocean stretched out for thousands of miles, all the way to Antarctica. It was one of the few places on Earth not totally overrun by man, and he wondered briefly if he would ever get there.

Off to his left the main beach started. The gentle arc of the coastline extended away to where the Keurbooms River mouth broke into this arc, exposing a complex system of flood and ebb deltas. Beyond that the white sandy beach continued until the houses at the far end intruded into this natural progression.

He stretched out, flexing his muscles, and feeling the warmth of the sun on his body. Why did he have to worry about all his problems when it was actually good just to exist?

It was quiet, the way he liked it, and he looked back at the main beach with a growing sense of contentment. There were a few people enjoying the late afternoon sun. Probably locals, taking their dogs for a walk or just getting out into the fresh air. Nobody was swimming, the water was too cold. At that time of year, early spring and out of school and university vacation periods, there were also no surfers.

All this made him accept his position until change came. Nonetheless, he had been mulling over his future more often recently, realizing he had to make some decisions, but without seeing any real direction for his own career.

He looked out at the ocean again, but then became aware of the metallic sound of footsteps on the cobbled stones behind him. It took him a moment to register the presence of another person in his space, and he felt mildly irritated. He turned his head to see who it was.

She was walking quickly across the parking area to the bench where he was sitting. A slim, dark-haired girl, she was obviously engrossed in her thoughts, looking down at the cobbles and kicking at a small stone as she walked. He noted her thick-soled shoes, looking like boxes tied onto her feet, and wondered why anyone would want such ludicrous footwear.

Then she saw him sitting on the bench, and abruptly changed her direction to go to the bench to his right.

He was still looking at her, and she scowled briefly. "What are you looking at? Do you know who I am?"

He was taken aback by the sudden tone of her voice, and replied with a distant “Nooo....” He turned away, looking back at the beach.

However, his whole reflective mood had been changed by this intrusion of another person. His annoyance became curiosity about her attitude, and he again turned his head to glance in her direction. She had sat down, and was hugging her knees on the bench and gazing out to sea. The ungainly shoes stuck out over the edge of the bench seat.

Should he know her? Her dark hair was rather unkempt and falling about her olive-colored face. He could see a fine profile, high cheek bones and small upturned nose. She was wearing a floppy grey sweater with a stark red line through the sleeve and repeated on the side that he could see. Her denim pants had some jewelry embroidered down the leg.

“Should I ” he began to say tentatively, but then hesitated when he realized that she had stopped being aware of his existence.

But he was inquisitive now. “Should I know you?” he asked more forcefully.

She didn’t respond immediately. It was as though his words had to penetrate a fog around her.

“What?” she asked curtly, turning to him as she realized that he had said something.

“Should I know you?” he asked again.

She looked at him anew: brown nondescript hair, and a handsome, interesting face with deep-set dark eyes. He was wearing a loose grey track suit top over a white T-shirt, faded blue jeans and well-worn thongs. He didn’t fit the mold of one of her fans.

“No,” she said firmly, “I doubt it.” She turned away again.

He didn’t know what to say. Her tone was dismissive, and he felt awkward, now intruding into her space. He wanted to continue the conversation, but didn’t quite know how.

“Are you from here?” he finally asked.

Again it seemed to be some time before she registered that he had said something. She turned to him again: “What...?” she asked, frowning, but

then appeared to comprehend what he had asked and said brusquely "I'm staying at the hotel." She gestured back to the hotel situated off the road to the parking area.

"Oh," he responded, his voice tailing off. It was one of the prime resort hotels in Plettenberg Bay. Very expensive and way out of his league.

She was still looking at him: "I suppose I must now ask you where you are from?" With a hint of sarcasm.

Her attitude was irritating, almost condescending, yet he was still curious. "Of course," he replied after a while, "though I doubt whether I would tell you - a total stranger - such confidential information."

It wasn't the answer she was expecting, and it obviously pricked her interest. She cocked her head slightly to one side, and after a moment asked "OK so tell me."

He contemplated his options. "Do you mean that in a generic, evolutionary or ethnic sense? Or possibly you are referring to a familial home-stead? Over what time span do you consider this question?"

She almost smiled, turning slightly to see him better. She took her time to answer: "I would guess that your descent from the trees was fairly recent," she said slowly. "So we need to consider the present. Do you have a residence where you regularly retire?"

"I lead a fairly peripatetic existence," he replied urbanely, now relaxing and enjoying the repartee, "though my progenitors do have ownership of an establishment here above the lagoon." He indicated vaguely above the Keurbooms estuary where it formed a blind appendix. He added as an afterthought: "Been coming here on vacation since infancy."

She didn't answer immediately, but looked at him with new interest. Finally she said: "So, a local. You're lucky." She said it slowly, as though contemplating her own situation. Her voice had a clear, resonant quality. Her accent was South African, but with a slight admixture of Indian and possibly an American twinge. Paul wondered what she was doing in Plettenberg Bay.

“Asha!” The shout came from behind them: a commanding, angry and harsh cry that broke into their developing conversation.

Paul turned abruptly to see who the new intruder was.

The man was walking across the cobbled parking area to her bench. He was wearing an expensive-looking jacket, dark pants and an open white shirt, and his leather shoes clipped on the cobbles. She started at the sudden call of her name, and without looking around resorted to her previous posture, hugging her knees tightly, staring out to sea, and attempting to ignore the new stranger’s presence.

“C’mon Asha,” he said again as he came up, now more persuasively. “We have to get going.”

She still ignored him. He had now reached her bench and was looking down at her. He was handsome, though his slightly swarthy, heavy face was flushed. Whether this was from exertion or from anger was not clear.

“Piss off, Luke,” she said flatly, looking steadfastly out to sea.

A slow smile came onto Luke’s face: “That’s not gonna make me go away.” He put his hand on her shoulder and squeezed. “C’mon, we gotta go.” Brusquely this time.

“Ouch!” she said, trying to pull away, “that hurts.”

Paul had been watching, not deliberately, but out the corner of his eye. He felt he had to do something.

“Hey fella,” he said, “take care.”

Luke looked up, suddenly aware of Paul’s presence. He relaxed his grip on Asha’s shoulder. “Who’s this?” he asked, frowning.

Asha moved slightly away from Luke. “A friend,” she said brightly. Then, after a slight pause, she asked “Hey, friend, what’s your name?”

Paul suddenly found both strangers looking at him. Luke, still frowning, objecting to his intrusion, and Asha, happy for a break from having to go with Luke. Wherever that may be.

“Paul ...,” he replied, looking at her expectant face.

“It’s Paul,” she repeated to Luke, “he lives here.”

“So I hear” said Luke, still looking hard at Paul. Then, having satisfied himself that Paul presented no particular threat, he continued “C’mon Asha, we can’t sit here and listen to some local beggar.”

Paul flushed, irritated at this uncalled for description of himself. “That’s OK,” he responded, “we’re pretty choosy about who we allow here.”

Luke saw no reason to condescend to a reply. Asha seemed embarrassed at Luke’s attitude, and started “That’s not what he meant”

“Of course it is,” Luke cut in. He took her by the arm again, and she slowly stood up, looking briefly in Paul’s direction. However, Paul had decided there was nothing further that he could do. He caught her eye, and then turned to look out over the beach again. She decided that she had no further excuse to delay going back to wherever.

“G’bye,” she said tentatively, but Paul didn’t answer. He heard them clip-clop over the cobbles behind him, back in the direction of the hotel.

Paul was happy to be alone again, but the whole tenor of his scene had changed. Suddenly all his problems seemed distant, and he found himself playing over their conversation in his mind. He wondered what she did should he know her? Asha? The name really didn’t ring a bell. When she turned to him he had seen a lively, beautiful face. He smiled: he didn’t know what had made him so verbose, but she had enjoyed it, and had replied in kind.

Who was Luke? Were they married? She had rings on the fingers of both hands, but that didn’t necessarily mean anything. He shook his head, suddenly irritated by the direction his musings were taking him.

The early spring sun was waning, and a cool breeze was picking up from behind him. His thin track suit top was no great protection, and without socks, his feet were also getting cold. There was still no-one else on the small lookout area, and he stood up and made his way down the hill to the back of the main beach. There were a few older people coming off the sands, a couple with a wet Labrador, and the ubiquitous car-guard sitting on the bench near the toilet complex: he would not have had much of an income today.

Paul thought about a walk on the beach to the mouth of the estuary, but then he noticed a few clouds obscuring what was left of the sun. It would be a cold walk, and so he continued past the beach and up the steep hill to the town. Before reaching the top, he turned right into the little street where his 'familial homestead' was situated.

His family had owned the beach cottage for more than fifty years, overlooking the appendix-end of the Keurbooms Lagoon. It was a grand position, high enough to take in the sweep of the estuary, the thin barrier beach and the coastline past Keurboomsstrand and through to Natures Valley in the distance. The coast at that stage became more rugged with cliffs extending down to the sea. The Robberg Peninsula defined the southern end of Plettenberg Bay and gave it protection from the Southern Ocean swells. Beyond Natures Valley the Tsitsikamma coast was unprotected, and it was seldom that there were not substantial waves battering the coastline.

Paul loved to walk that section of coast. It was wild, and the grand majesty of Nature was never more apparent than when a storm was whipping up the sea so that the surface was just a white sheet of spray, and the stark black rocks withstood the onslaught of giant waves by propelling fountains of water high into the sky. However, it was difficult to get there now: it was a marine protected area, and to get onto the Otter Trail one had to book years in advance. The protection was essential to conserve the area, but the rising costs also meant that many people could not readily enjoy the reserve.

Paul was staying alone at the family cottage. When his grandparents died they bequeathed it to his mother, aunt and uncle, but the family had expanded so much that the cottage was now held in a trust. So many family and friends used it that it seldom stood empty for long. It was Monday, and he had driven through from Port Elizabeth for meetings the next day. A cousin and his family had left after using the house over the weekend.

For supper, he microwaved the piece of pizza remaining from lunch, and ate it as dusk came on. He had a mound of reading to do, and still had

to finish his quarterly report, but before starting on his work, he sat on the balcony, watching the evening lights over the estuary.

His grandmother had told him stories about Plettenberg Bay when she first stayed there: few people, bad roads and of course no electricity or the paraphernalia of modern living. The dunes between the Keurbooms and the sea were clear of the invasive Australian acacia trees. At that stage, the mouth of the estuary was about a mile farther down the coast, and it seemed a natural progression for it to move down the thin barrier-beach until a flood broke through again at the far end. The last time that had happened was more than eighty years ago. The changes in such a short time had been amazing, and involuntarily Paul wondered what the next fifty years would bring. Not too much of the same, he hoped.

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