

Once Upon A Deadline

By

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First, let me just say that deadlines neither move nor scare me any more. I treat them with Benign and Masterful Neglect. In fact, I have found that they make a lovely whistling sound as they zip past me. So come mid-afternoon, on the Inaugural Once Upon a Deadline Writers' Marathon, I wasn't particularly worried when I hadn't yet found inspiration from neither the day's events nor the daily paper.

Luckily, inspiration came to me in a blinding, cosmic flash as I sat in the Writers' Cage at Paddington Markets. She was a 70 year-old woman with brown suede mid-ankle boots, black fishnet stockings, brown leather-&-suede dress, three huge rings per hand, chest-length long white hair and thick glasses, topped by one of these white cloth fisherman's hat that make female Japanese tourists look demented. She was sitting on a plastic chair that was covered with plastic to protect it from the rain. Facing her was a young woman in her late teens or early 20s, leaning forward earnestly at the Font of All Knowledge while perched uncomfortably on a purloined, upside-down NSW Milk Board crate, which was covered with a many-folded, multi-coloured rug. The pair of them was only a metre or

so from me, so I could hear the older woman's advice. The advice was not particularly deep – not so much “*Never have sex with anybody who has more problems than you have*”, but more along the lines of “*A piece of bread, lightly toasted, can be eaten for breakfast*”. In fact, to be cruel, the advice was amazingly banal, shallow and trivial, such as, “*Putting milk back in the fridge stops it from going off*”. Even so, the young woman hung on to every word. She seemed totally enthralled, in a trance, as she opened her wallet, took out \$20, and gave it to the older woman. The young woman then left, to be immediately replaced by another young woman who was also seeking Total and Undeniable Truth.

Just as an aside, I thought that perhaps this older woman was not respected by her family, who didn't know that she would sneak out to the Paddington Markets and get some nice tax-free money, as well as a welcome esteem boost from having people sit worshipfully at her feet.

But this is a diversion from the Real Topic, which is, of course, Human Labour. Human Labour was what the Female Guru was showing, and Human Labour is all over today's papers – from the Industrial Relations Bill, to the “misaligned wheel guide” at Sydney Airport that stopped 5,000 pieces of international luggage travelling on the same plane as their owners. This “misaligned wheel guide” was an example of crappy Human Labour. Just so that you have the Big Picture, in classical economics and in all micro-economics, Human Labour is one of the three factors of production, the others being land and capital.

So, as I walked out of Berkelouw's Bookshop at 8 this morning, I was impressed by the labour of the working gang that lifted a huge light pole out of the ground. I was also impressed by the care and attention that Happy, the tattooist, showed to his client, Alexandra, she lay on her belly. Happy, a chunky Spanish-American-Filipino, crouched over his client's lower back tattooing away, and said, "*If you fart, it's double the price.*" Happy had obviously thought about what he did, because he pointed out that a tattoo is actually empowering to its owner, because of the combination of pride and commitment. Usually people will decorate themselves with clothes, hair products, and even make-up. These are all very temporary, while a tattoo is forever.

Our next stop, St. Vincent's Hospital Emergency, is probably one of the best examples of high-quality human labour. St. V's is one of the oldest hospitals in Australia, and is still run by the Sisters of Charity. It sees about 32,000 patients each year, and one third of them come via the Emergency Room. The Human Labour load is huge – 15 nurses, 8 doctors, and lots of social workers, cleaners, rent-a-cops and the like. This is high-quality skilled labour, as distinct from the genial old woman dispensing advice at an hourly rate higher than the doctors and nurses.

At McDonalds, which I used to love for the chocolate thickshakes back when I was a taxi driver, I got a different insight into Labour. The workers at McDonalds, Kings Cross were all enthusiastic, young and short – too short to change the menu signs, which they did by athletic jumping and deft finger movements while at the arc of the jump.

But I got a different insight into labour from an over-friendly junkie, with missing teeth, deep creases on the face, and a few dozen coin-sized lesions from infectious carbuncles all over his skin. He was sitting at the next table with his friends, who looked just as shady as him, and he tried to befriend me by talking about my laptop. He told me he was a welder with Qantas, and when I tried to make friendly conversation, he seemed to have no idea about welding jets. But it was obvious that he thought that this was a trade to be respected.

The Wayside Chapel, also in the increasingly gentrified Cross, relies almost entirely on dedicated non-judgmental Human Labour. A few decades ago, the Richmond Report threw thousands of mentally ill people out of psych hospitals into the community, so that the now-unused hospital land could be sold to private enterprise. The Wayside Chapel, and organizations like it, keeps these people alive. Every morning, 50 people get free breakfast. It provides showers, toilets and free clothes for mentally ill and homeless people, most of whom are mentally ill. Each year, the NSW Government gives the Wayside Chapel less than the cost of a top-of-the-range Mercedes-Benz to do its work – hence the 300 volunteers on the books. Most of them are highly skilled, even though their salary is zero.

When I was at Concord Hospital, I used to assist a very skilled surgeon in heart surgery. I knew that he was very skilled because he made it look easy. On the ferry, the deck hand made looping the thick mooring rope around the bollard look easy. I've tried it, and it's really hard. In fact,

these marine types don't talk about "tying knots" – they call it "bending rope".

The ferry took us past the Opera House. I have a genuine Opera House tile at home, with its unique identification number moulded in the side, and use it for hot teapots. The NSW Government, for some bizarre reason, decided to sell all the spare tiles. A Certain Person bought them, and then sold a few to my friend, who gave me one. On the Opera House, these tiles sit out in the open, in all weather. They have been especially designed to shed dirt, so that they look pretty. When the rain hits, it washes the dirt right off.

The Certain Person found himself stuck with thousands of these super-high-tech tiles. Yup, he wasn't very good at that type of Human Labour called "selling". So he got all of his now-hated tiles, and used them on his steep driveway – all the way from the street right to the very back of his garage. Everything was fine – until the day that it rained. Coming down the steep driveway, he began to slip. He hit the brakes, and continued to slip on the super-low-friction high-tech tiles. He zipped down the driveway, and straight out through the fibro back wall of his garage into his swimming pool.