

For His Own Good

He was walking. He couldn't remember how long he'd been walking for, but that seemed to be his sole focus in life. To walk.

A stentorian voice announced through his headphones "Six point one".

Left, right, left, right and a slightly rising terrain. In the distance people were larking around in water. But his pace was inexorable. He could not control it.

"Six point two. The journey to fulfilment is achieved by sacrifice" announced the Man In The Headphones and the speed increased slightly. Left right, one two. A softer female voice followed on: "Five point five. This really is for your own benefit and, in time, you will surely learn to appreciate and cherish it."

Further announcements came from the male voice, each one preceded by a number. It occurred to him that the number was greater each time and seemed to indicate, as best he could discern, a speed in kilometres per hour. Similarly, the numbers preceding each message from the female voice preceded an increase in elevation. As the number pairs climbed the sweat began to roll off him. "Seven point five. There's really no need to worry," came the soothing female voice, "wipe away the tears and rejoice in your achievement". There were certainly droplets running down his face but he wasn't sure if it was sweat or whether they were tears of frustration and fear, but he had nothing with which to wipe them away other than the clothes he was striding in. His eyes stung.

The messages – annoying aphorisms of the type enjoyed and disseminated by social media addicts – continued apace. "We were born in pain and without pain there is no gain". "When pain stops pleasure begins". "Selfishness leads to sloth and sloth leads to selfishness". "Being good to ourselves empowers us". "Empowerment enriches the well-being of those around us". "There is more to life than decreasing its speed". "Life is short so we must rush to achieve".

At some point he had become aware that there were others like him, rows of them sweeping away in the distance to his left and to his right, each seemingly in their own private hell and each presumably with their own personal target – to "do the very best possible - or impossible" as the male voice had commanded several times.

Seeing the other walkers he wondered to himself 'Does perceiving the suffering of others help diminish one's own suffering?' but an inner voice replied 'Well, I couldn't give a flying frig whether it does or doesn't but why aren't those swimmers getting any nearer?'

What seemed like hours of steadily increasing confusion and exhaustion passed by, regularly punctuated by The Voices.

"The gym is closing shortly" announced a cheerful, youthful voice, not through his headphones but in the real world. "Could I ask you to stop your treadmills". Indeed, the swimmers in the pool a floor below, which was the only feature visible through the glass walls, had all gone. A couple of pool attendants were beaching assorted inflatable devices and using long-handled nets to scoop out the day's collection of detritus – paper tissues, a nappy, sticking plasters, an enormous pair of men's swimming trunks and there was even a toupee. He was able to lip-read a little and was sure one of the attendants had jokingly said to the other 'Not so much swimming as going through the motions, eh Darren?'

As he exited with relief, realising that he'd been experiencing some sort of hallucinatory trip most likely brought on by over-exertion, he realised he was still wearing his headphones. He was about to snatch them off when the commanding male voice came on again, this time in a more than usually threatening tone. "Zero. Don't forget, you must be here at seven sharp tomorrow morning. There is work to be done. Lateness breeds consequences". The female voice followed. "Zero. Be good to yourself. Eat well and sleep well. Your body is the temple of your soul. Industriousness creates respect". Then, harshly and mockingly, both voices chimed in unison "Idleness breeds contempt and lateness breeds consequences".

David Silver
July 2018