

## 2008 – The Year of the Word

Dear Friends

Well, 2008 has been a long year. So long that Kevin 07 has forgotten most of his election promises. New Year's eve saw my family and me burying my Gran on a 43<sup>o</sup>C day. It was truly the end of an era, Gran was the last of her generation and my last mother's-side relative outside my immediate family. Gran was born in 1911, and, unlike a certain ship with a lofty name launched six months after her birth, Gran proved unsinkable (almost). Unlike the Titanic that went to sea with three real funnels and one fake one, there was nothing fake about my Gran, a sheep farmer's wife from Barham on the Murray River. The great Depression cut her teenagehood short and she was the kind who, thanks to her own work, was self sufficient in many of their supplies – Granny stored and skimmed the milk and made butter from the cream. She grew a good many of her own vegetables – one of my earliest memories is of sitting in my high chair in front of her stove eating stewed rhubarb which she had grown and swimming in cream which she had skimmed. She raised chooks for their eggs – I remember the fridge was always full of them and she must have had some method for making sure that the eggs were eaten in the same order as their gathering, for I never remembered a bad one accidentally left at the bottom of the fridge. And all this notwithstanding that, even today, chooks do not lay eggs with “best before” dates stamped on them. We children loved her food, and when our mums foisted the austerity of Nathan Pritikin's diet onto us in the 70s and banned lard in cooking, we would yearn for Granny's real fried eggs and her buttered scones. The results speak for themselves – Nathan Pritikin, nancy-boy, wussed out, pathetically kicked the bucket and was as dead as mutton at the tender age of threescore years and ten – Granny stomped onwards to sixteen and fourscore, bouncing around until six years after Pritikin had racked ignominiously off, weighing only two point two kilograms at his death! It has since been revealed that his diet was made known to him by an ancient Martian civilisation and the barrenness of Mars can be taken to be proof that his diet was incapable of sustaining life, at least any life worth living. How can there be life without ice cream and coffee?

The first half of January found us baking on the beach at Inverloch, where we have gone for the last three years. It was a grand rest for us with Nakira enjoying the sand and the water immensely. 2008 for us has been the Year of the Word – when Nakira magically taught herself to speak, her words bringing Mindal and me further delightful insight into her world. Nakira began the year with really only two words, “this” and “that”, meaning, respectively, “what's this” and “What's ... what's .... well, I'm bored with this “this” word .... What was that other sound I can make in my throat to get Mum and Papa to tell me what other grunt those grown-ups ascribe to this odd looking thing over here?”. By March, there were still no more words (or so we thought) but Nakira's hand signs and gestures suddenly sharpened in expressiveness and clarity. A little pointy finger jabbing softly on the ground beside her with a fetching smile and a look said, “please sit beside me”; hands together beside the ear said I want to sleep (the classic sign for “sleep”, but we'd never shown her this); if Papa or Mum were a bit slow on the uptake, then one could always sprint to the cot, grasp two of the bars and shake the whole thing with a violence matched only by the shrillness of the wail beseeching us to lift her into her bed to get the message through (it's funny how the plaster seems to be cracking only in Nakira's room). A high pitched glissando “thaa, thaa” suddenly replaced “this” and “that” for “what's this unwonted thing” as she sharpened her precision in using “this” and “that”; “thaa” is still her word of choice to ask this same question. The second of April was the day that I wrote down as being the day for her next definite words – “eat cheese” – I suppose she waited till then lest we might have thought she were joking would she have said it the day before! Then “more, more” for anything from “please dish some more of that ice cream”, “please keep stroking my back”, “please read that book again”. Counting to ten followed next, with reading numbers and letters becoming a favourite pastime for most of the year thereafter. Suddenly, lone-word nouns and adjectives gushed literally in their hundreds, and “bye” with a slam of her door as she shut us out of her room became a hilarious game for her. Nakira is a delightfully giggly child, seeing fun and laughter in so much and bringing a Santa-Claus belly laugh forth that leaves her breathless and with tears streaming out of her eyes, although with that cheeky grin still shining from her exhausted little face. Earnestlier, the same door-slamming gesture told us we'd better get rid of our guests and come and put her to bed pronto, as she was drowning in sleepiness but was not going to stand for any fun being had without her around! By May, make-believe was highly developed, as I was treated every day on our walks in the park with “pineapple”, “ice cream”, “apples” and “fruit salad”: otherwise known as stones, bits of bark, clods of dirt

and such like, which I had to pretend to eat with her making huge “yum yum” utterings and much pretend burping and munching as the Sesame Street Cookie Monster would make. English’s Subject-Verb-Object structure would now have been discernible to any aliens who might drop in for a chat with her, and “S-V-O” became the standard model for most of her talking. It was at this time that I suddenly realised that much of her hitherto understandable babble was instead great swathes of dialogue from her favourite TV (Dora the Explorer, Play School, Connie the Cow) memorised word for word or recitings, likewise verbatim, from cover to cover of the books we were reading to her at night. We’ve since become aware that she often takes whole phrases and complex sentences, at first uttering some vague likeness to their sound and then slowly filling them out as context allows her mind to shade the meaning in; it’s rather as though she takes a shrunken likeness of a pre-packaged inflatable phrase and blows it up to its fullness like a balloon. Thus H’pu becomes “he-puss”, then “hairpuss”, then “herodpuss”, at last becoming “Henry the Octopus” and so on. Music, important to her from birth, now became especially so as she began to sing along to almost everything. Wellaway and woe to us! – Mindal and I, formerly keen choir singers, have now had endless rehearsals of Haydn, Fauré, and Beethoven squeezed out of our brains to make room for the songs of the Wiggles, Playschool and their ilk to move in and play nonstop in our heads! Late one night I suddenly realised I was singing “Upsy Daisy” in full falsetto voice to myself, and the person looking up at me wasn’t Nakira (who was three kilometres away home in bed) but the 7-11 attendant nervously asking “can I help you, sir?” from behind the security screen, her hand hovering above the duress alarm! Oops! Upsy Daisy, for those of you unfamiliar with the delights of childrens TV, is a doll whose dreadlocks quiver expressively signalling her mood rather like a cat’s tail, and who can inflate her skirt so that it opens up to show her petals off and show that she is, after all, indeed a daisy opening to the sun; she comes from “In The Night Garden”, a fave of Nakira’s and a refined follow-on from the “Teletubbies”, the latter’s success doubtless financing a more cashed-up set complete with full orchestra scores and Derek Jacobi as the reader with his famously immaculate elocution. The latest for Nakira is an awareness of classes of things – cows, snakes, cats, elephants all being “animals” (those four would have to be near to Nakira’s favourites). I asked her last week what kind of an animal I was – she looked up at me, frowning earnestly, muttering “animal papa, animal papa” over and over and clearly in deep thought about this question, knowing that there must be an answer. After at least two minutes of this (she can be highly intense and focussed when something catches her mind) her face suddenly lit up, she had found an answer she was sure must be right and delightedly shouted “Papa animal Monkey!”. I swear there was absolutely no prompting on my part – I was utterly dumbfounded by the intelligence of this answer. How it was worked out I guess we shall never know, but I am altogether sure that it was worked out, as Nakira’s eyes flickered up and down my body seeking clues, and not guessed. “Indeed we are a kind of monkey”, I said, sweeping her up in a hug and dancing a jig with her in my arms. Nakira is highly inquisitive and looks very closely at her world – ants and their nests are fascinating to her and she can watch them and other like bugs for forty minutes at a stretch. A poster I saw once at the baby health centre proclaimed, “The World’s greatest scientists and explorers wear nappies”, a statement which has proven truer and truer as time goes on. I, as a scientist, become more and more aware that most of what a scientist does is to try to emulate (always poorly) the prejudice-free open inquisition so perfectly made by a child in their learning about the world around them. It is truly awe-inspiring to reflect that nigh everything that Nakira can do has been wholly self taught, her extraordinary capabilities born of an instinctive yearning for inquisition begotten by three billion years of life evolution. Pretty much everything I have done with my professional life seems pretty limp in comparison. Mindal and I continue to work three days a week each and look after Nakira for two, so that we can both witness and be part of the wonder of Nakira’s growing and early life.

Mindal turned forty this year. We had a party for her on a perfect evening at the Fairfield Boathouse. Unfortunately, we didn’t get any photos as Mindal was too busy catching up with people and I too busy chasing Nakira. Mindal enjoyed her party enormously (I just asked her whether I could write that as she sits beside me) and she, Nakira and I went along in matching rainbow coloured clothes. We’re not doing too much recreation worth telling you about, but we can assure you such recreation (mainly catching up with friends) is worthwhile for us! In some ways 2008 was, aside from Nakira’s growth, somewhat uneventful for us, perhaps a token that we are finding parenthood a bit more within our grasp. For those of you reading this with tiny little ones and maybe not getting all the sleep you need, take heart! By the end of the first year Mindal and I were feeling that Nakira is a little gift from heaven, after finding things terribly tough for the first months.

July saw all three human animals in the household laid up with the ‘flu for two weeks, even though both Mindal and I had had ‘flu injections. We know it was the ‘flu because Nakira was actually tested for it: her fever set off a fit,

which frightened us given that she was on anticonvulsant drugs and so we went to hospital to have it checked out. There one of the grotesquer tests done was a snot sucking exercise where poor Nakira had to forbear a suction hose stuck up her nose to get a sample to grow a culture from. All this grief to prove that our 'flu injections were a rip off?!! I asked the doctor doing this bizarre test whether he had studied medicine with Adrian Edmondson (aka Vyvyan Basterd from "The Young Ones") as it did strike me as something Vyvyan would think up. Luckily; we were all sick together, so there were four in the bed (the three off us together with whichever one of our mutually co-loathing cats got there first) and the little one was too sick to say roll over, so neither Mindal nor I had to do much aside from sleeping the illness off.

Mindal couldn't come to the snow this year as her work wouldn't give her the time off. I decided that I would take Nakira to see the snow – Mindal enjoyed the peace and quiet of an empty house and no-one to look after besides herself. I spent a very low key week with Nakira – I only skied one morning. I had booked childcare two mornings and had thus planned to do more, but our car blew up on the way to the snow and we had to spend a good deal of time waiting around for the RACV to come and tow the wreck off the mountain. This suited Nakira just fine; having mastered the whole alphabet (at least the uppercase letters) she took great pleasure in reading each car's number plate and we probably read sixty or so before the RACV at last came to our meeting place. Not before some gonzo accosted us gruffly with "what are you doing?", which I answered to, "Knocking your CD player off, what does it look like?". I'm sure the two of us looked just like car thieves with tiny Nakira holding her pink teddy bear peering intensely at the hinder end of his big black BMW! The exploding car engine was pretty impressive – a huge billowing cloud of steam bursting into the freezing night air and frightfully exciting for Nakira, who told anyone who would listen "hose go kahboom" for about two days thereafter. Nakira had looked forward to coming to "Snowy Mountain" and, since she was asleep for most of the time I drove up it, she took some convincing that she was actually there. I had my hands full looking after her and we just went for strolls around the village and also went tobogganing, which Nakira loved. She called it "riding Nakira's red boat". We had great fun ringing cowbells at the finishline for the skiers in the Hoppett and Birkebeiner ski races. It was in all a magical week seeing Nakira's delight in the snow. I wish Mindal would have been there to see her too.

Our cat Freyja became the RSPCA's "Miss August", featuring as that month's model for their cat calendar. Freyja and Zeus (our bigger and older furry offspring) still loathe one another, but they do get great pleasure in terrorising each other. They do form Faustian alliances, however, to ward the neighbour's cats off their lands. Freyja and Nakira are beginning to really like one another, although Freyja is still nervous and halting around her, but I do sense that Freyja will be snuggling up soon on Nakira's bed each night. Freyja follows Nakira and me to the end of our street when we walk to the shops every second day or so and is usually waiting for us when we get back. She sits at our gate much of the time, meowing at passers by trying to cadge a pat from whomever she can beguile.

Mindal's work has been enjoyable to her this year – she still works as a database programmer, shovelling great chapters of computer code that I find utterly incomprehensible into the computers that keep quite a few of our telecommunications and emergency service networks chooffing along. Aside from the odd, inevitable professional disagreement, she does enjoy the company of her co-workers. We went to dinner last night for her work's Xmas party and they do seem a fun bunch. One downside of her job is that she still has to take exams from time to time, logging into some automatic qualification-dispensing web server every six months or so after having studied furiously for the foregoing two weeks. Sadly, the organisation I work for, Optiscan, seems to be stoving itself in and imploding swiftly – we have only a month or two's solvency left. The most maddening thing about it all is that the product is working superbly and is in high demand – at any time other than the world's biggest financial crisis it would be a cinch to raise further money to keep us going! For my part, the optical systems I have designed in the last couple of years are now coming back from their factory in Gießen (near Frankfurt) working very well and this makes even the dying days at my work a lot of fun. The guys in Germany are fun to work with, but they do seem to find me a bit a difficult customer at times – the technology application is unusual for them, its theoretical grounding is fairly tough to grasp (at least it was for me – read what you will into that) and so they find it hard to see me as anything other than anally obsessive. However, they are highly capable people and if we (Optiscan) do continue somehow, I am sure they will get their head around things in time and this will smooth over some at-times tense communication! What I will do if Optiscan does go down the gurgler is not yet clear. There is certainly important work for me to do at home raising Nakira. We're lucky that Mindal's job is fairly safe, and we have savings to fall back on if something goes awry there. My biggest fear is that I might go a bit spare if I look after Nakira full time – the physicist in me

needs stoking - hopefully there will be the odd bit of contract work I can pick up to keep the brain from going feral. If not, I'm sure Nakira and I will be delighted to see any of you in the New Year – just drop in for a chat and you can watch the two of us (three if Mindal's not at work) tend the Depression veggie patch and joke about the corporate imbecilehood that turned us on the streets!

Lots of Love to you all

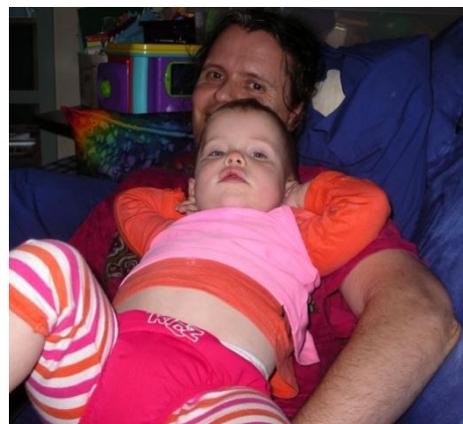
Mindal, Nakira, Rod, Zeus and Freyja!



Your destination lies with me Skywalker; I was your dummy keeper



Got a problem, Mick Gatto?



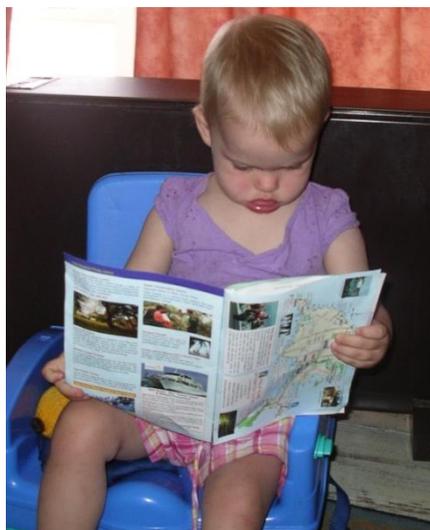
What a tough life



Ahoy there!



Recovering from the 'flu in good company



I want this revised and on my desk Monday morning!



Fall's Creek, August



Sleeping with Grandpa Routley