



You may recall (that is if sleep deprivation has not impaired your short-term memory) that I recently posted an entry here on the subject of isolation. In it we observed what a pain in the ass it is to take small children, well, anywhere. But despite the hassle, whinging and misbehaving, I still tried.

You see I always had this image in my head of taking my children to museums and discussing art and history with them. I pictured myself with them at the Dinosaur Adventure Park nodding sagely at the life-size replicas and explaining the difference between an herbivore and a carnivore. And one day we took them to the zoo.

There were lots of things I hoped to teach them during our outing:

- About how different animals need different conditions in order to survive,

- How all creatures are important members of their eco-systems and how the extinction of one species throws off nature's fragile balance,
- How dangerous animals are to be respected,
- And how people, as custodians of this earth, must look after it and all of God's creatures.

With these nuggets of wisdom in mind, I was all ready to do my "Heed my words, grasshopper" bit and point out how beautiful life is in its many forms, when my oldest piped up, "Mommy, why is that monkey's butt so red and puffy?" Looking at the monkey's butt, I had no explanation for its decidedly haemorrhoid-esque appearance. In fact I vocalised the first thing that came to mind: "Now that's just gross."

Don't get me wrong, the kids loved looking at the animals – but they were far too excited to absorb anything. They were too busy roaring into the face of the lion on the opposite side of the glass to listen to warnings about respecting dangerous animals. They were too busy commenting on an elephant taking a dump to hear a word about poachers and endangered species. And the question of which animal would win in a fight (a lion or a tiger) was more pressing than the question of man's responsibility to and for our world.

The absolute clincher, however, came as we were exiting the zoo. Predictably in order to leave the premises, you had to first pass through the gift shop. No outing would be complete unless you end it with children throwing a barrage of "I wants" and "Can I haves" at you. Within any given gift shop each family looks the same to me. There is the angry, tired parent massaging his temples and yelling at one child who is knocking glass figurines off the shelves while another cherub

throws a tantrum because he can't have some cheap, plastic tat to take home as a memento.

For once my eldest did not ask for yet another stuffed animal, a fairy princess gift set (what that has to do with the zoo I can't imagine), or a set of felt tips. No, this time she paused in front of what looked like sealed cans of paint.

"Mommy, what's this?"

I read the label: "Zoo poo, honey."

Gales of laughter. "Zoo poo?"

"Yes, it is a mixture of elephant, rhino and camel poo. If you put it on the garden, it will help the plants grow."

Nothing more was said about it – until we got back to the car. I asked her what her favourite part of the day was (imagining that she would name a cute animal or maybe begin to reflect on all the knowledge I had tried to impart). Her answer was immediate: "The zoo poo" accompanied by more giggles. So that was the sum total that she took from the experience – not one fact about our world and nature, not even one fact about one animal, just the existence of zoo poo. Indeed, so smitten was she by the very idea that she spontaneously composed "the zoo poo song" (sung to the tune of DJ Otzi's "Hey Baby") which she sang over and over and over again for the duration of the 2 ½ hour drive home.

It's the reality gap again, isn't it? We feel we should be passing on our wisdom and helping our children to become conscientious human beings and they are singing the praises of animal dung stuffed in a paint can. Or is the problem not with them but with me? During the process of growing up, did I become a little too conscientious? Have I lost the ability to just relax and have fun? Have I, in short, become way too

serious? I remember thinking as a child that sometimes my parents were really no fun at all and I vowed that I would never, ever forget what it was like to be young. But in many ways I have. In my novel, Good Neighbours, I address this issue:

"If you had asked Lludd then 'Will you remember this always?' he would have answered with an emphatic 'Yes.' He would always remember what it was like to be eight or nine or ten years old; and the world of his childhood ... would always be with him. But those of you who have grown up know that this is not possible. An ever-widening ocean of years and experience pulls you in its current further and further away till the land of your youth seems so distant that it might as well be a point on the other side of the globe. The child you were becomes a stranger (a wholly different person to who you are now). This is why generation after generation of children insists that their parents 'just do not understand.' And they vow that they will remember what it is like to be young. But they do not remember, because in the end, they can't - not really. Inevitably, their own children will one day make the same complaint and the same vow and on and on it goes."

It's true. As L.P. Hartley wrote in The Go-Between, "The past is a foreign country" -- when you were there you thought differently, felt differently, behaved differently and spoke a different language. Your children are in that world right now. The question then becomes how do we, as adults, communicate with the young inhabitants of that land? Excellent question -- and it is one that I don't have a definitive answer for. I have discovered, however, that sometimes the best way to connect with my children is to shut my mouth and open my ears and listen.

So what was my daughter telling me as she sang "The Zoo Poo Song"? Oh, lots of things. She was telling me to lighten up, to find joy in

simple, silly things, to value fun as well as education and most of all to, please mom, join in. I added my own verse to the song.