

Learner and teacher as fellow travellers

A story tribute to Jack Whitehead

One day I came to the edge of a cliff. There seemed no way forward, and the way back was blocked by a strange and faceless creature that stood with his huge arms stretched across my path.

“Only members of the Laurel Crown Club may proceed,” he said.

“Which Club is that?” I cried, tired from all my many travels, “and how can I join it?”

“You join it by following my dance, step by step, and after each step, proving you are as good as I am.”

“But that’s ridiculous,” I said. “Why should I want to do that? Look, here is the garland of the storyteller, woven by myself from a thousand stories.”

“That is nothing,” said the creature.

“And here is the crown of the teacher, made of shells excavated from a thousand shores and threaded together with spun learning.”

The faceless creature laughed a bitter icy laugh.

“None of these will bring you the Laurel Crown, because none of the steps are like mine,” he crowed. “Without this, how do I know you are good enough to continue the journey?”

“Because of all the journeys I’ve already travelled!” I shouted. “The bridge-building journey, the river-crossing, the boat-making, the flower-blooming, the story-making, the wisdom-excavating journeys. Do none of those count?”

“None are mine!” yelled the creature. “And I, Thought Doctor, am the only one that can lead the way. Take my journey or none at all.”

“OK, if you must, show me the way then. Since I have travelled so far, I might as well do this further journey.”

Thought Doctor pointed with his long bony finger towards the hills. I noticed a long narrow track like a railway that burned an unbending route through the valleys, tunnelled through the hillside, and plunged into the woods the other side.

“That’s it,” he said. “You follow me, along the track, copying my dance, and at the end you win the crown.”

Story epilogue

The journey seemed possible, and better than throwing myself over the cliff. But still, it did not seem a very exciting or useful way to travel, with so much landscape to explore on either side of the narrow track, and so many ways to explore apart from following his single step. And how would I carry with me all the garlands, sarongs, shells, and songs of previous journeys, if I was not allowed to offer them and share them on the way?

I threw myself down onto the grassy ground to think about my options. As I did so, I noticed appearing from behind Thought Doctor's cloak, a silent group of people, cloaked, pale and downcast, gathering around me on the cliff.

"We are members of the Laurel Crown Club," they said.

I looked at them now as they stood nearer me.

"But you all look the same!" I cried.

"When we started we were all different," one of them said, "but by the end we have all learnt Thought Doctor's moves so well, we look just like him."

"If you are Laurel Crown members, where are your crowns?"

"Here!" said one, and threw off his hood to reveal a shiny metallic crown that looked far too heavy for him and made him stoop forward.

"Here!" said another, and revealed the same metallic shiny crown but it was so large it kept dropping over her eyes, and she had to push it up every few minutes.

"Here!" said another, and there was the crown again, but every so often the poor owner picked up a corner and began scratching underneath, shifting it round so it would sit more comfortably.

"None of your crowns fit!" I cried, concerned for them.

They laughed in chorus, like a pond of hippopotami.

"Of course not. There's only one size crown. If it doesn't fit, well that's just too bad. They all need to be the same size, to make sure it's all fair."

"But being just the same size makes it NOT fair," I cried.

Thought Doctor rolled his eyes, exasperated, and turned away.

"She clearly doesn't understand," he snorted. "Come, Club, let's leave her here to think."

I sat by the cliff edge, suddenly alone, and looked in both directions. In one direction was a sheer drop down to a fast running river gorge. On the other was the Laurel Crown track, long and straight, with bunches of flowers every so often along

Story epilogue

the route where travellers had failed to survive. What to do? Now, with the Thought Doctor gone, there seemed to be many more possibilities. Looking again at the landscape ahead, it seemed laughable that there should be only one track forwards; on the contrary, there seemed to be an infinite number of paths, and surely nothing would stop me exploring them?

Encouraged by this thought, I stood up and again reviewed my options. In one direction was open hillside scattered with a blue dusting of heather; in the other direction was the path I had come from, winding over the cliff edge and dropping back down to a chain of rocky bays. I chose the new direction, the open hillside. Surely, if I set foot there, Thought Doctor wouldn't stop me?

So I began the new path, into the blue heather and the unmarked terrain. It was welcoming underfoot, and comforting to walk inland away from the cliff edge, wading through the tall grass, not knowing where it would lead me. After a while, as I walked, I suddenly became aware that there was a Fellow Traveller quietly beside me, and like me, quietly tracing the path of the wild flowers. I looked up to take note of him, and to my surprise, saw he was wearing a crown too.

"Oh! Your crown fits!" I cried.

"Of course it does," said Fellow Traveller. "I made it myself."

We carried on walking, quietly for a while.

"But is it a Laurel Crown, like the others?"

"Yes, of course it is."

"But did you do that long journey, like the others?"

"Yes, yes I did," said the Traveller patiently.

"But how is it you don't look just like all the others? How is it you have strayed off the track?"

"Well I worked out the route for myself."

"Is that allowed?"

"Of course it is. That's what I did, and I have a Crown and it fits just fine."

I could see that all of those things were true. It seemed an exciting and revolutionary way to become a member of the Club.

"Could you show me how I might get a Crown that way too?"

"Sure, of course."

We carried on walking, and the Fellow Traveller didn't seem to be showing me anything at all, but just following where I went along the hillside.

Story epilogue

“But you aren’t showing me. Shouldn’t you be showing me the way?”

“No, quite the reverse. You choose which way you want to go, and I’ll come along with you.”

“Are you sure?” I asked, nervously. It all seemed so different to Thought Doctor.

“Look, the end of the journey is over there.” He pointed beyond the wood where the narrow track disappeared. “You can get there any way you like.”

I took from my sack a handful of shiny stones gathered from a Mexican beach and threw them down.

“Can I use these as stepping stones?”

“Sure, of course,” and we jumped from one to the other, first me, and Fellow Traveller following.

“Take a stepping stone to put in your crown,” he said, as we reached the end. “Now, where next?”

“If I scatter the marigold garland we could follow its scent,”

“Sure, try that,” said Fellow Traveller.

It was tiring, running after the scent of the marigold as it blew in the wind, and at the end, I threw myself down on a rock and sighed.

“I don’t know where to go next.”

“Yes you do. Look in your bag.”

“I’ve nothing there. Nothing useful at all.”

“Of course you have. Just have a look.”

“A sari from India, a sarong from Hawaii, a branch from the learning tree, -“

“OK, let’s start with the first one. Find out where the sari wants us to go next.”

I took the sari out of its bag. It was buttercup yellow with streaks of quiet lavender, and as it unfolded from the bag it began to blow like a sail towards the east.

“There we are then,” said Fellow Traveller, “that’s the direction we have to go in.”

So we followed the sail of the sari, and then the kite of the sarong; and then the branch of the learning tree doused us around the tors and I hardly knew we had travelled so far before I realised the station had appeared at the end of the Thought Doctor’s narrow track.

“Do you mean we are nearly there?”

“Sure. You need to get your laurel crown ready for submission to the Club.”

Story epilogue

“Oh no, one of those terrible metal ones that fall over your eyes and itch?”

Fellow Traveller laughed

“A made-to-measure one, made with all the mementoes of your journey. It will take two months to craft”

“Are you sure?” I said. “Will it be as good as the others?”

“Well, I think it might be better, because for one thing it will fit, for another it will be quite unique and for another it will have mementoes of your journey inside it.”

“What do I do when I reach the last station?”

“When you arrive, and put on the crown, look in the mirror. There you will see what you have become and where the journey led.”

In a quiet place at the station gates, I unfolded all the contents of my travels around me and spread them on the ground. How to fit them together? Surely they could never be crafted into one coherent and beautiful piece?

But as I stared at them hour after hour alone now outside the gates of my destination, it all became clear.

The learning branch became the strong anchor that held the crown together. With the golden learning thread I wove in the Mexican stepping stones, securely at the front. Then I rolled the lavender and buttercup sari and the sarong with the silver fish and turtles, into long narrow drapes and plaited them together with the learning thread to hold the branch in place. Between the binds and threads, I planted small clusters of heather from the journey. The crown was fragrant and colourful as a spring garden. Then I lifted it to my head, and tied the plaited fronds behind just tightly enough to be comfortable and secure.

“Will this do?” I asked.

“What does the mirror say?”

I looked in the mirror. I saw myself, like a spring goddess with all the colours of the hillside in her hair. I didn't look a bit like Thought Doctor or even like Fellow Traveller.

“I look like the goddess of my story!” I cried, surprised.

“Exactly that,” said Fellow Traveller. “The journey was yourself, so it follows that the journey leads to yourself. And your Crown celebrates yourself.”

“Is that going to be alright, do you think?”

Story epilogue

“That’s the only way it *would* be alright. I think you are ready to submit your Crown to the Club,” said Fellow Traveller.

And together we walked towards the gates of the station at the end of the mountain path, both of us with heads high, wearing our Laurel Crowns.