

Another Pudding is Possible



by
Tom Wallace

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PREFACE

The way to Utopia may not be what you expect! The story of Cockaigne, a medieval version of utopia, is much like many other versions of utopia. It is always Spring, there is perfect weather, a fountain of youth and abundant food. The residents of Cockaigne are paid to sleep. No-one ventures to ask where all the food comes from or other such technical questions. The unique thing about Cockaigne though is how it is reached. You see, access to Cockaigne requires would-be utopians to eat their way through three miles of rice pudding. It seems that the rice pudding journey is an ordeal to be endured rather than a first taste of pleasures to come. Learning of this, I wondered if those journeying to Cockaigne open tunnels in the pudding through which others might follow. Or does the pudding simply close up behind them as they journey through? If so, how do they breathe, or even see their way to the next meal of pudding that would bring them closer to their goal? The perils of the journey seem to be numerous, even for those who, like me, have a particular fondness for rice pudding. But the prize is great! So I invite you to take up your spoon with me and plunge in. We have three miles to travel. Whatever your taste in puddings, it's going to be a sticky journey. But, I suggest, we need our visions of utopia so that we might face the future. Let us eat pudding together!

The stories in this book were first published individually via the websites Booksie.com and Storywrite.com. They are based on memoirs recorded in an earlier work, *Three Miles of Rice Pudding*.



ANOTHER PUDDING IS POSSIBLE

*A tale where the author finally gets
the message that his father doesn't
like rice pudding!*

It started with a little group of artists in the small city of Dundee, on the East coast of Scotland. I was living with my Dad as his carer at the time. We were in our home town of Newport-on-Tay, which faces Dundee across the mouth of the River Tay.

The artists had started a monthly silent walk on a Saturday in Newport and I decided to join them. After one of the walks we are gathered at the home of two of the artists who also lived in Newport. Back at the artists' house, someone has a guitar. There are a lot of postcards in the house where we have gathered. The guitarist and I

set about making up songs – telling stories about what the postcards might be depicting. It is a happy time – someone even scribbles down the lyrics as we weave our songs.

As I said, I was living with my Dad as his carer at the time. The menu for my meals with Dad was fairly consistent – both of us being creatures of habit. Saturday dinner's dessert course was always a rice pudding. Back at Dad's house, the rice pudding is in the oven. Eventually, fear for its fate overcomes the desire to stay on at the artists' house and continue with the song-making. I rush home. I catch the pudding just in time.

I had lived with my Dad for about three years by then and every Saturday delivered a rice pudding as the crowning glory of the week's menu. However, it was on that very Saturday of the silent walk and the singing and story-telling that my Dad explained he did not in fact like rice pudding. Communication had never been our strong point. I was reminded of the ancient stories of a utopia called Cockaigne. Strangely, access to Cockaigne could only be achieved by eating through three miles of rice pudding. I had subjected my father to – if not three miles of rice pudding – then certainly three years of weekly doses. Laid end to end, and with a seven-inch bowl, it comes to around thirty-five yards. It would have taken another 171 years of weekly puddings for my Dad to traverse the three miles to the mythical utopia of Cockaigne, and he was already 92.

But I like to think that I am not a hard-hearted son. Rice pudding was replaced by trifle from then on. Another world might not be possible, but for my Dad at least, another pudding was possible. In truth though, Saturdays were never quite the same.

Caring for an elderly relative is a strange experience. In my mind it has become linked to our human obsession with utopia – both personal utopias and utopias designed for whole societies. I know that probably sounds a bit obscure, so let me explain.

First there is that time in our lives (if our parents live long enough) when you, the child, start to be seen as the 'responsible adult'. It might be at a restaurant, when the waitress automatically places the bill in front of you rather than your father or mother. Or it might be during some medical consultation about one of your parents, where

the doctor addresses all of their comments to you rather than your Mum or Dad, even although the consultation is about them.

Such events set off a trail of thoughts in my head. Dad's life was once in the ascendant. He had hopes and dreams about building a future for himself, through study and work. Then he met Mum and together they planned to find a house, to make that house a home and to make it a safe and loving home for the family they had together. A personal utopia therefore. Perhaps not perfection, but as good as my parents could make it.

Society in general has similar aims. Opportunities for study. Meaningful work. Improving lifestyles. Safety. Home. Human flourishing. There comes a point, like those moments in our personal lives, when we realise that whether society is good or bad is down to us – we are the responsible adults.

But then the inevitable decline as illness, old age and frailty set in. How does Dad or Mum feel about this? It's a difficult thing to witness – a difficult thing to discuss. The child can only hope that their parents don't feel that their efforts to build a life for themselves have been in vain. In short, you hope that you've not been a disappointment to them! You hope that they are proud of their offspring!

Time, then, is what makes the difference in a human life – from starting out with hope and optimism to our last days – looking back with either satisfaction or disappointment, or a mixture of the two.

And time is likewise a factor for society. To think of an ideal way for humans to live together in peace and prosperity is difficult enough. That is like our youthful aspiration – and often the aspect of utopia that people think of as naïve. But to make a society that is resilient in the long-term – through changes in culture, changes in economic conditions, changing environmental conditions, changing international relations – well, that's another thing altogether.

Society, of course, does not face an inevitable decline of old age and death. There are always new generations of people coming up to replace those who are lost. But still there is a particular kind of care needed for both individuals and human societies in general. Indeed care for the elderly and for everyone else has a special place in

society at large. It is that aspect of society that is so often hidden and so often provided for free. Without care the world of consumer capitalism would collapse!

For our parents, and other folk we may know, we need to remember that great legacy in their lives – those hopes and dreams of their youth. For society, can we likewise cherish all those dreams of utopian futures that we all share when we reflect on the state of the world?

And for both the elderly person and the mature society we can say there is the task of ensuring that their lives have not been lived in vain – that we are proud sons and daughters and also proud citizens.

To abandon these things is to shut off all possibilities – both individually and culturally. It is to say life is not worthwhile. The glass is half-empty. There is no point in trying. Things will never change.

I hope things will not be this way. I hope we can always say there is hope! Another pudding is possible! Another world is possible!



CHOCOLATE, ALCOHOL AND SKIMPY SWIMWEAR

*A tale where snacking and swimwear
may prove a distraction...*

As I mentioned I had joined an arts group in Dundee. It had the clever name of Dundee Artists in Residence – the acronym working out to D-AiR. We're artists – we can do anything – is a phrase I often use. Daring to do stuff is part of the deal – daring to be ourselves – daring to do stuff others won't try – daring to say things others won't say.

The arts group had arranged a swim in the River Tay at Broughty Ferry, a posh suburb of Dundee. We were hosted by 'Ye Ancient Amphibians Society' and met at the harbour. There is a little building there with toilets and small changing rooms. It was June, but as

each of us emerged ready to take to the water, we displayed multiple layers of swimwear and wetsuits. All that is except Doug. A cheer went up as he strode out in just a tiny pair of pink Speedos. Someone had a camera and we gathered for a group photo. Doug was at the front, striking a series of body-building poses.

The tide was low, so it meant a long climb down a metal ladder bolted to the side of the harbour wall. But at last, in the water, we just bobbed around and chatted. I spotted someone I knew and swam over to her. She had so many layers of wetsuit it was like she had become an inflatable dinghy.

A proper sandy beach starts from Broughty Ferry and continues North and East for many miles on the North side of the Tay Estuary. After our swim we headed there. Sand was blowing in a stiff breeze, but someone had brought a tent. I gratefully clambered inside, along with four or five others. It's a bit of a squash, but luckily I had some resources in the form of a flask of hot chocolate and a large bar of fruit and nut. I explained to the others that fruit and nut chocolate counts towards one's five a day. I shared out the goodies and everyone seems contented.

Outside, meanwhile, more hardy souls had built a bonfire. As the sun went down and the wind dropped, we all enjoyed some simple food and drinks around the fire.

Days such as these are memorable days. Nothing much happens perhaps but nonetheless there is a lot of satisfaction in time spent with friends, food, drink and some fun activities. Many utopias of the past took this theme – simple pleasures. It's a good idea for a utopia, provided we don't stop to ask where the food and drink comes from, who makes the clothes and the tents, how did we light the bonfire, and so on. The other thing to notice is the general benevolence of people. Perhaps the theory goes – given enough food, drink and entertainment and people won't have any reason to fight each other. It's a very optimistic view of human nature!

Some modern utopias still play on these themes. There's a bright future, it is claimed, that can be brought about by technology. Other utopias hark back to a lost Arcadia (an Arcadia that never really existed). This is a world of small villages, simple agriculture and

none but the most basic technologies. Sometimes such simple worlds are offered as a response to climate change.

Whether you consider any such utopias to be desirable, they all face a couple of challenges if they were ever to be put into practice. The first thing is that the world is always changing, so any utopia offered to us must be able to accommodate changing circumstances. The other thing to say is that we humans take a bit of organising! As I've said, the benevolence of people, and indeed good relationships at all levels of society, are things that many utopian stories either assume or ignore. But this seems critical. We are political animals, so there needs to be some effective system of governance to go along with all the promises of the bright future a utopia might offer. The governance system in fact is going to be the thing that addresses the issue of change that I mentioned earlier. So we might say that a large part of resilience comes from good governance.

What might a utopian governance system be like? I can only say that there are a few basic things that we seek as humans. Amongst these are fairness, equality, freedom and justice. And to be genuinely utopian we should add the opportunity for human flourishing in the mix – the opportunity for each person to reach their full potential. This is a bit like the 'dare' in our artists' group with which I started – to be able to be ourselves, speak our minds and express our gifts and talents as people is a big part of human flourishing. I admit though that these are all rather abstract aims. There needs to be some very pragmatic decisions made by a society in order to balance out the idealism of a utopian vision with its mission of achieving fairness, equality, freedom, justice and flourishing.

What if all this could be achieved? Then, at last, we could settle back into those happy days of friends and family, recreation, food and drink, shared conversations, art, music, literature – in short, all the things, both simple and profound, that raise our lives above the level of mere survival. It's a strange feature of utopias that they often bring together the deeply personal – body, food, family, friends, pleasure – with the really big questions of politics and economics.

Should we dare then to dream? Utopian dreams are often despised these days. But if we are not aiming for utopia then what exactly is it that society and culture are aiming at? A reasonable level of mediocrity? A chance to do our own thing as individuals? Efficiency? Safety? These seem like lesser dreams to me and unworthy of us. Let's dream big again! Let's dream of utopia!



I OWN MY SKIN, I OWN THESE CLOTHES AND I OWN THIS LITTLE PATCH OF GROUND!

*A tale where torn up currency leads
to reflections on ownership and
property.*

Whilst staying near the small Scottish city of Dundee I had, you may remember, joined a group of artists called D-AiR (Dundee Artists in Residence). We had fun with this acronym being so close to 'dare' and dared many experiments in art along the way. The group had sort of morphed into a new group –

the Dundee Commons – with many of the artists crossing over to join the new group. To give it its official title, we were ‘If the city were a commons’ – so very much about ideas around ownership, sharing and community.

Our first meeting is in a little café that forms part of a large church and associated halls. Quite a lot of folk have shown up and I am distracted looking around at the people as the meeting gets under way. So I have not really taken in the introductory blurb and before I know it our host for the evening divides us into pairs. Then he picks up some five-pound notes (this was back in the day when fivers were still paper). He tears each note into two halves and presents the halved notes to each of the pairs. There seems to be no explanation, or perhaps I have missed the explanation. Thoughts of sellotape come to mind. My partner and I could simply re-connect our two halves of the note and spend the money on something useful, like chocolate or alcohol. Maybe though, our shared wealth should be used for some ‘higher’ purpose? Should we give the money to a beggar? Perhaps we should keep the money and see how things unfold with the Commons project? Perhaps the meaning of the split notes would be made clear in future weeks. My partner is not big on conversation, so we kind of fall into that final alternative as the default option.

My five-pound partner did not return to the Commons Group, so our note never did get joined. My half languished on a shelf at home until plastic notes replaced paper ones, and its faint promise of wealth was finally extinguished.

Part of the five-pound note message was of course to question the meaning of ownership. And ownership, let’s face it, is a peculiar concept. I might claim, for instance, to own my own body. It’s not an unreasonable claim! But could we say that a tree or a plant ‘owned’ itself in the same way? Perhaps yes, perhaps not. How about a stem cell, or a virus? There comes a point on the evolutionary tree where the concept of owning ourselves loses its meaning! We need, it seems, to have a certain level of agency and consciousness before the idea of owning ourselves means anything.

We could think of clothes as the next most immediate and personal instance of ownership. But we might briefly mention the world of tattoos, body piercings, jewellery and the like that forms a strange hinterland half way between bodies and artefacts. Humans are unique in this – unless we count the weird things people do with their pet dogs! We make things very immediately part of ourselves when it is a mark on the skin or a piercing or incision that is difficult or impossible to remove. But we also say something to the world by the way that we decorate our bodies. This is the cross-over these things have with clothes – they are all statements.

This is perhaps something of a digression, this visit to tattoos and piercings, but I mention it because it shows that the notions of ownership and property are slippery and strange.

The statements we make with our clothes may be about our wealth, our status, our class, our gender – any number of things. Function plays only a small part in the story. It is culture that provides us with the social clues that give meaning to all this. The messages are often powerful – this is much more than just who can afford more durable or warmer clothes.

So clothes and the various items we carry around with us are statements of identity. Who we are as people – or who we like to think we are – is expressed through clothing. This is why uniforms can be a bit disturbing. The uniform denies a person their unique identity. Sometimes this is reassuring. The policeman, nurse or judge sets aside their personal self for a while and represents the state. And hopefully the state is doing its job of looking after us! But sometimes of course the actions of the state can feel threatening. And then the uniforms worn by its representatives become sinister. States that wish to promote some kind of equality amongst their citizens (as if that is going to be possible) try extending the use of uniforms to everyone. It is, to say the least, a very superficial way of promoting equality! We are more complex creatures than this!

So what about that ultimate claim of ownership – owning a piece of ground? Earlier we noted that it is a kind of natural thing for conscious beings with agency to claim ownership of their bodies. Could we say the same for the Earth herself? That might be a bit of

a stretch! But generally, it has to be said, the idea of some person (or animal, bird, or plant) 'owning' a bit of the Earth is equally puzzling. As a child I was concerned with the idea of a piece of land continuing downwards, as a very long pyramid, to the centre of the Earth. Here, everyone's piece of ground meets at a point. But it's more puzzling above ground! Every land owner has an ever-expanding slice of sky, which, depending on the large-scale structure of the universe, would eventually reach the edge of space, or continue forever and therefore be infinitely big, or would somehow curve back on itself. Things get even more complex when you think about owners of land on the moon or other planets, whose slices of space would then intersect with Earth-bound owners! And what if you live in a flat? (Suffice to say, I was an unusual child.)

Perhaps a more pragmatic concern over land ownership however is that benefit accrues to the land owner that very often deny benefits to those who are not owners. This is a particularly entrenched and insidious consequence of land – so much so that it is almost a golden rule of economics! Apart from the unfairness involved, it can also lead to destruction. The peculiarities of land ownership are often at the root of pollution, loss of bio-diversity, and the odd (and usually negative) impacts on the design of towns and cities.

Sharing land – holding land as a commons – is then such an obvious benefit when you think about it in terms of fairness, protection of the environment and enhancing our urban spaces. Those split five-pound notes, with which we started this story, are telling us about the need for co-operation. Money is meaningless without a society to ascribe value to it. And it could also be said that money is useless unless there is a background of co-operation to make the money work for the benefit of society.

We spent some time thinking about owning our bodies and our clothes and the various gadgets we have around us and we saw how important these are to our sense of identity and status.

There is something wonderful about the quirkiness of how we decorate our bodies and the weird world of fashion. Our sense of ownership of course extends itself into the notion of real estate. Here we find oddities, obsessions and fanaticism that once again

demonstrate the peculiar ways we approach questions of ownership and property. When it comes to real estate, the quiriness of human nature can be for both good and ill. I'd suggest the challenge is to find some way to retain the good and avoid the ill.

The straight up kind of solution, in order to avoid the many pitfalls I've mentioned above, is to think of ourselves as custodians of land and real estate. We need to see it as a shared resource even when we own it outright. We need to see it as a commons. And a commons is not an easy thing. It takes work and commitment to achieve and sustain it. And before all that, there's the task of convincing people it's even a thing worth having.

In a memorable phrase, British journalist and author George Monbiot has advocated 'private sufficiency, public luxury', and this very neatly captures the benefits we might gain if we could only get our heads around this land ownership and commons conundrum. But well, at this point I cannot help thinking of my own local council's efforts towards 'public good'. It feels like we are not so subtly being lured into a care home, where the chairs are plastic and the walls are painted hearing-aid beige. That's why I've stressed all the quiriness in our behaviours around ownership and property above. Somehow, I think, if we were to make 'public luxury' work, we would have to capture that strange spirit that currently manifests in private eccentricities! The straight up solution of just changing the politics around land use is not going to captivate or inspire us.

I think we could have flourishing and pollution-free eco-systems, bountiful nature, beautiful cities and thriving communities if we were willing to think our way around the peculiarities of ownership with which we are currently fixated and, I'd hazard, think outside the box. Could we find a way of joining up our five-pound notes to do something both inspiring and amazing? Could we capture private eccentricity in public space? I think that would be a change worth trying for.

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