



Michael

Gasping Fish

*Which is more dangerous?
Being a fish out of water
or trying to find a way to
be in your element?*

A bubble can't float without air. The winter dust is affecting my chest and I struggle to breathe. Even Ventolin doesn't seem to help. My Robin has flown away in an Air Malaysia bubble. Without her helium, my bubble is sinking. Why didn't I tell her how I felt before she left? I open the windows, but there's no fresh breeze to blow away the stale air stifling my spirit.

It seems that today the Soul Café is teeming with gasping fish. Too scared to return to their natural element, they prefer to thrash around hopelessly.

At table four, I notice Tanya grabbing Henry's arm.

“But you said you were going to tell her last week.”

Strawberry lips has become strawberry face.

“I just couldn't. The time wasn't right.”

Henry eyes are glued to the menu.

“Well when are you going to tell her?” Tanya is pouting.

“I’m under enough pressure already without you adding to it,” Henry snaps.

A tear wells up in Tanya’s eye. Henry continues to study the menu.

I take out a postcard depicting Rocky’s latest adventure. This time, he’s trekking in Himachal Pradesh. He’s the one person I know who’s never been trapped. India goes on the pillar, just below Machu Pichu.

Gasping like a dying fish, the grey beard at table 3 fiddles with the sugar sachets. His companion with the blond glasses watches him for a few moments and then blurts out:

“What’s with you?”

“We’ve just been restructured again,” he laments.

“Oh no.” She raises her eyebrow. “McKinsey stuff?”

He nods.

“So what job will you be doing now?”

“They want me to give up my research job and manage people. I hate managing people.”

His eyes, like a dying fish, bulge with despair.

“And what’s worse, they want me to take over the Brits and Nelspruit operations. I’m going to have to spend four hours a day in a car. It’s going to be hell. I just can’t do it. It’ll kill me.”

“So why don’t you resign?”

“I can’t,” he whimpers. “I’m trapped.”

“Why? Is it the money?” He doesn’t answer.

“What are your share options worth?”

The blond insists.

“I could get R1.2 million.”

“So what’s the problem then?”

“I wouldn’t know what to do.”

The blond’s jaw drops. She is obviously thinking of all the things she could do with R1.2 million.

“I don’t understand you. You’re in a job that you hate. It’s destroying you. You have a way out. You could resign tomorrow and live on your share options while you figure out what it is that you want to do with your life. What’s stopping you from resigning right now?”

I stop clearing the empty plates from the table next door. I want to hear his answer.

He drops his head and looks at his cappuccino. The bubbles have dissolved. He stares at the murky brown liquid. I wonder what he sees reflected in the cup. Finally he whispers.

“I guess I don’t have the courage!”

I grab the empty plates and rush through to the kitchen. Joy drips soapy suds as she takes the plates from me. As I wipe my hands dry,

I hear the call of my blackboard. The chalk moves quickly in my hands.

*Courage is the power to deal with pain, fear, or danger.
Every day, we face our responsibilities to others.
Why don't we use our courage
to make ourselves happy?
We are all born to be heroes.
We die, fearing to be ourselves.*

“Hey Michael, how about another cappuccino here.”

Paul waves the book he's reading. Orson barks in agreement.

As I scoop the milky froth into his cup, I think of Robin's bubble theory.

Why are so many people trapped in the wrong bubbles? Here's Paul, an author who never writes, waiting in a bubble that doesn't belong to him. Every day he comes to the Soul Café and talks about other people's books. He knows more than anyone about how other authors write. But he doesn't write himself. Why?

Sitting at table 7 is the struggling artist, Sherry. I once managed to persuade her to show me one of her paintings, a giant cardboard cut-out of a woman hurtling through space. The universal fear of insignificance. It made me shiver, it was so amazing. But Sherry refuses to display her work. She has a machine-gun loaded with ready excuses.

“The galleries don't want to take my work.”

“I'm not well known enough.”

“It's difficult to break in.”

“They take too much commission and they do nothing for it.”

“They don't treat artists well. I don't want to be abused.”

“I can’t put on my own exhibitions.”

Her justification bullets keep her safe in her ‘never be successful’ bubble.

Robin was right. It takes courage to break the skin of an unhappiness bubble, and float into our own spirits.

I hear my blackboard whispering to me. I let it speak.

We are born to be creative.

To do.

To risk.

To shine our own light.

*During your life journey,
you choose which lands you wish to visit:*

Excitement or boredom?

Courage or helplessness?

Adventure or excuses?

Excuses drag you down.

Courage lifts you up.

Waiting is a slow death.

Action changes the world.

You owe it to yourself

and to others

to become

what makes you special.

The scraping sound of my fingernails against the blackboard brings me back into the Soul Café. My chalk has dissolved to the size of a bead.

“Another cappuccino, please.”

“One cappuccino coming up,” I shout too loudly.

“Hey Michael. A group of us are going to O’ Hagens for a drink after work. Are you keen to join us?” Maria flicks back her dark hair as she waits for my answer.

An iron fist grips my heart. I respond automatically without thinking.

“I’d love to. But I can’t.”

“Oh another time then?”

“Sure, another time.”

As I shamble to clear the dishes from table five, an inner wasp stings my heart.

“It’s easy to criticise other people’s lack of courage. But what about you? Why are you so scared of getting close to others?”

I amble to the cappuccino machine. The aroma of ground coffee beans envelops me in a bubble of comfort.