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My Perfect Sunday morning

by Garf Collins

“Let’s start from Crowlink and walk on the Downs again. The weather’s been so foul it will be very muddy anywhere else,” said Gill last Sunday morning.

After parking we set off briskly down the hill. It was great to be out in the fresh air, so we strode along very happily.

It’s never a straight walk with Gill. A circular route took us over a couple of the Severn Sisters and then along the cliffs – keeping a safe distance away from the edge in which some alarming cracks had appeared. Finally down to Birling Gap, where it was obvious from the car park that a lot of people were taking advantage of the improved weather.

The cafe was almost full but luckily we found a table. Gill ordered a bacon butty and I requested a cream tea. “Doesn’t matter if it’s not yet lunchtime,” I said defensively.

A young woman asked if anyone was sharing our table. When reassured she sat down and waited patiently.

Gill asked, “Where have you come from.”

“Oh, from Eastbourne. I came from London yesterday but today we’ve walked along from Eastbourne.”

A promising start. Gill did mean 'from' locally and the woman, despite looking far-eastern, responded in kind. Soon we know that she lives in Crouch End and is studying for a PhD in English Literature. Her spoken English was excellent and occasionally colloquial.

She then waved and a gently spoken man arrived at the table. She introduced him - not by name but by saying, "this is my friend, He's a part-time philosopher." The strangest introduction I've ever heard.

The great advantage though, was that we were free to talk about ideas rather than the weather. We had an excellent discussion about the system in China. She believes democracy wouldn't work there. We debated and agreed that democracy doesn't work when it is installed top down and then is usually captured by autocrats. But she has seen from being here people are free to speak their minds (very freely at the moment we observed.)

Then we wondered what were the basic requirements for democracy. The philosopher advanced the idea that it needed to rest on local communities. Groups, whose members develop a civic responsibility to each other. With that base, higher levels of representation seem to make sense as an extension of that fellow feeling.

We then observed how philosophy has narrowed. The Ancient Greeks seemed to have very wide ranging philosophers but modern academic philosophy seems to be more and more about less and less. In the extreme, like debating the numbers of angels on the head of a pin.

It's amazing how much you can get into a conversation in the time it takes to consume a coffee and bacon butty.

We headed back over the hill to our car, agreeing that not only had we had a good walk but we had enjoyed a conversation which was far more interesting than most we could remember.

Back home, Gill said, "That was a perfect Sunday morning."