

A Dramatic End to a Great Weekend Leads to Some Philosophising

On March 9-10, I ran a weekend trip for the Darwin Bushwalking Club. Everyone told me that it had been a really good weekend. We were on our way home. A friend of mine was driving. About 50 km from town, just after he'd decided he'd pull over to give the driving to me when he could safely pull off the highway about 200 metres further on, he had a microsleep. I caught him as he careened across toward oncoming traffic. He came to with a start and overcorrected. We wound up off the road, in a ditch. For one brief moment I had hope, then I saw the concrete culvert dead ahead. Bang. The lights went out.



The picture at left above made the front page of the local newspaper. The one in the centre is a close up of the first. You can't really see it but, in spite of my seat belt, I broke the windscreen with my face. The one at right shows the broken culvert. After it hit the car travelled something like 8 metres to arrive at its last resting place before it was taken to the wrecker.

People coming behind thought the car jumped something like six metres into the air before nosing down on the far side of the culvert. I remember hearing the crash. The next thing I recall is someone helping me out of the car and lying me down on the ground. They kept me still until the ambulance came. All four of us who had been in the car were taken to hospital. My car is a total write off. It may be hard to believe, but the photos above make it look as if it's in better condition than it is.

The driver and one of the other passengers were released that night. I was taken to surgery about 10 pm but the surgeon on duty wouldn't touch me until I'd been seen by a plastic surgeon. One came to see me the next day, said whatever to whoever and I was operated on about 11:30 pm Monday night. They put something like 30 stitches over my eyes. The stitches came out a week later on Monday March 18.

My eyesight seems to be back to where it was before the accident. I saw some scar management people the day after the stitches were removed and have been seeing them regularly ever since. Only time will tell what my face will eventually look like. Fortunately, my glasses hide the worst of it. And, all things considered, the worst isn't all that bad. We are very fortunate that the NT government has a no fault insurance scheme which our vehicle registrations pay into. This pays next to nothing for "pain & suffering" but it pays virtually everything for medical expenses. You get treated immediately without any thought of other insurance.

The young woman in the back seat wasn't wearing her seatbelt. She finished up draped over the driver with her head under the dashboard. She got out of hospital on Thursday and went back for surgery on the 19th when the swelling had gone down. She had a number of minor skull fractures.

Besides the gashes over my eyes, both black at the time but now normal, I had a number of scrapes and a lot of bruising where the seatbelt caught me on the right as I twisted under the strain. Walking isn't too bad – I went for a 2 mile walk the day after I got out of the hospital. I've even managed a few runs. It was, however, uncomfortable for me to sit for more than about half an hour for the first few weeks. But, at last I can work on catching up on the paperwork.

I've had a lot of time to pause to reflect on my life over the past few weeks. If I hadn't been wearing a seatbelt, I'd be dead. If the car had stopped dead instead of somehow going for the sky and jumping over the culvert, losing momentum all the way, I'd probably be dead even with the seatbelt. The woman without the seatbelt would certainly have been killed.

I had an amazing number of people call in to see me at the hospital. Two of them were two young women who were first on the scene after the crash. One of them helped get me out of the car and stayed with me until the ambulance came. I must have looked incredibly bad – blood everywhere. (One of the doctors took a photo and showed it to me. Not a pretty sight. But I have sight – that's far more important than what I look like.) Two people I'd never met who cared enough about a stranger to bring me flowers in the hospital.

And that, finally, brings me to the point of this message.

We are not given to know the time of our passing. Coming so close to a premature departure really puts that fact and what's important into perspective. There's so much that we worry about that doesn't really matter. Beyond the bare minimum we need to keep ourselves alive, **things don't matter**. People matter. Sometimes we forget that and, worse, we forget to tell those who do matter to us that they do matter. That's a thought for all of us.

I had a long conversation with one of the women on the trip. When she was in her 20s, she was doing a long sailing trip with one other person on board. She got a nasty virus infection (they never worked out what it was). The infection triggered an incredibly bad asthma attack – bad as in life threatening. It took the other person some hours to raise anyone on the radio and it took the better part of a full day to get a rescue helicopter to them. All the while she was using up the last of her ventolin and desperately trying to stay awake as she believed that if she went to sleep, she'd die. The doctors later said she was probably right.

She was released from hospital in Cairns without a penny in her pocket, without any documents of any kind, without anything more than the clothes on her back. That didn't matter to her at all. The only thing that mattered was that she was alive and back in reasonable health. (She was able to find a friend to stay with until the boat arrived with her things a couple of days later.)

She didn't NEED any of the things she was missing. She explains it as 'needs' versus 'wants'. There are a lot of things we may want, but beyond food, shelter, friends and family, they don't really matter. As I said in the note to my classmates, beyond the bare minimum you need to keep you alive, **things don't matter**. People matter.

After coming so close to departing this world unexpectedly, I couldn't let myself take a chance of missing the kind of communication mentioned in the second last sentence above the line. I've met many wonderful people through Willis's Walkabouts over the years, people who have become friends as well as clients. And the real point of all of this, to thank them all for being who they are.

A friend emailed the following to me as a joke. But, if you stop and think about it, it contains more than a grain of truth.

The Centre for Disease Control has issued a medical alert about a highly contagious, potentially dangerous virus that is transmitted orally, by hand, and even electronically.

This virus is called Weekly Overload Recreational Killer (WORK).

If you receive WORK from your boss, any of your colleagues or anyone else via any means whatsoever - DO NOT TOUCH IT!!! This virus will wipe out your private life entirely. If you should come into contact with WORK you should immediately leave the premises.

Take two good friends to the nearest liquor store and purchase one or both of the antidotes - Work Isolating Neutralizer Extract (WINE) and Bothersome Employer Elimination Rebooter (BEER). Take the antidote repeatedly until WORK has been completely eliminated from your system.

You should immediately forward this medical alert to five friends. If you do not have five friends, you have already been infected and WORK is, sadly, controlling your life. Get help immediately.

Stop and think for a minute. **Do you let your work control your life?** No matter how much you may enjoy your work (I'm one of the fortunate people who really enjoys their work), work is NOT the most important thing in your life. How many people reach the end of their days regretting not having spent more time working and less time with friends and family?

I've run trips at a loss, occasionally because I felt a smallish loss was worth it to keep faith with those who had booked but more often because I really wanted to do them myself. I hope to be able to keep on doing so for as long as I continue to enjoy what I'm doing.

What if a final thought.

What if I had been killed in the accident? What would have happened to the trips which people had already booked? The money is there to pay the guides and run them all. There are other people who can sign the cheques or operate the bank account. But, is that enough?

Willis's Walkabouts is too small to make it worth while incorporating. I operate as a sole trader. Given those constraints, what, if anything, would I need to do to ensure that the business kept running at least until the pre-booked trips had all run their course?

I suspect that these questions need a legal opinion, but if someone could point me in the right direction, it would be much appreciated.