JOHNNY ... WHO CAME FROM AUSTRALIA IN 1971

I had my first sense of India lying in bed as a little boy in a Sydney suburb staring at a carving of an ebony elephant with ivory tusks; it used to fascinate me. Then at school I remember a teacher reading to us from “The Diaries of Marco Polo”, and I was transfixed by the exotic and fabulous adventures. We had this custom at High School of former students coming to talk to us about their careers, usually boring ones like accountants or managers, but once we had these two big, hairy adventurous guys who I think had been missionaries in Africa. I was very inspired by them, as I imagined them saving the natives from pythons in the jungle. All these impressions were stored away in my head, like compost for my future.

As a boy I remember poring over copies of “Popular Mechanics” when the family was asleep, and making a crystal set with military headphones. I was always a crackpot kid, taking motor bikes apart, and for months my father let me use the garage for all my stuff and parked his car in the driveway. The biggest days of my life were when people cleared out their attics and garages and dumped all the stuff on the front pavement. I would sneak days off school and go around and collect it and bring it home.

Sydney in the early 1960’s was a very conservative and Americanised place. Certain influences from the outside world were beginning to creep in, and I was greedy for them. I was alert enough at 16 to read an anthology that was required reading for all hippies; “Mornings of Magic” I think it was called. Rudolph Steiner, Wilhem Reich and Sri Aurobindo were included in the book, and my eyes began to open. I was earning money at the age of 14, and on Saturday nights I would go with my friend who was part Aboriginal into the city for a Chinese meal. That’s as daring as it got in those days. Then things opened up in Sydney with a little cinema called the Savoy that showed New Wave French films – Jean Luc Goddard, Bergman, Truffaut – which showed me a whole new
world of sophistication. This place was fascinating to me, as I met interesting people sitting on cushions on the floor – I’d never seen that before – burning joss sticks under a big picture of Madame Blavatsky. It inspired a generation looking for something different from the beer drinking, free living society we had created. We made our own hippy flowing clothes and started festivals and welcomed flower power with open arms.

Through all this period I somehow kept up my architectural studies for five years, but dropped out before finishing the sixth year, much to my parent’s despair. They had always been loving and supportive of me, but found this rejection difficult to take. My father was a judge, and my mother came from a family of doctors, so their backgrounds were conventional and it was too much for them. Especially as that year I got married, had a baby, and got a job as a taxi driver.

My life changed abruptly when Buckminster Fuller, the progressive, far-out architect, came to my college to give a lecture. He had tremendous energy and concentration and was the first radical thinker I had met. He was felt to be a threat to conventional architecture and engineering, and in a subtle way I think he demolished many ideas in modern architecture. He was my hero. I wanted to be just like him.

My son Jonas, who is now 41, suffered badly as a young child from severe food allergies, which were very stressful for us all. My wife Jan decided to take him to the Pondicherry Ashram to try and find a cure for him. Jonas was only three at the time, and the only white child in the Ashram school, but within a few months on their diet of rice, curd and bananas he became a strong healthy child; it was like a miracle.

I went to work in the mines in Cairns in northern Australia to make money to come to Auroville. My wife had written to me that Auroville was a wonderful place; “A place of tribal music on a hill overlooking the sea” was how she tried to lure me there. In 1971 there were about 150 people in Auroville and it was administered by the Society. Mother was still alive then, and used to advise us, as we were often in very difficult and confusing situations. At that time Aspiration was the largest community and full of French spiritual snobs. I remember they all shaved their hair off at the same time as if they were part of a cult. When I went to the sort of entry group they had and told them I was an architect, they were very pleased and suggested I could work with Frenchman Roger Anger. I refused point blank, as I hadn’t come all this way just to continue the same work that my heart wasn’t in. I was told there was no place for me in Auroville then, so I went to live on the beach near Quiet with my wife.
I used my years of architectural training and my memories form Popular Mechanics to start building small keet houses. We could build a simple house with four granite pillars, a platform and a veranda in three days using four men. We later developed the capsule style and there was a huge demand for them. I found a soul-mate in Ramu, a Tamil man in whom I sort of saw myself mirrored in a different culture, and we used to speak a geometrical, not linear, similar language.

It was the perfect life, working up in Auroville in the day and going back to the Quiet beach at night. It felt good to offload some of that information I had been stuffing my head with for five years, and I was free to make mistakes, as we were only working in bamboo and keet, not concrete. The plan was to start a small settlement, plant trees and establish a night watchman, and then move on to repeat the procedure. Mother always said the forest should have few people living there, and she herself called our place “Fertile.”

Our house at Quiet eventually got caught up in a dispute, and we even took it to court, then got tired of fighting and decided to leave. The Pondicherry admission committee refused us admission for Auroville, so we went to ask Mother what we should do. “What’s the problem? Don’t worry about it” she said, and we realized this was an unofficial way of getting in. The Fertile community asked us to come and live with them, and we were very happy to take up their offer. We always felt we had Mother’s support, love and encouragement, and she gave us the very first plant for our garden.

Talking to Johnny after 36 years

I have now been here for 36 years, and been through many stages. The first one was teaching the fishermen how to fish. A friend of mine who had a degree in fishing joined me in making a catamaran, and we showed them how to do it, which of course was a total disaster. We then moved up the hill, and with a third generation farmer from Alsace showed the farmers how to farm. The arrogance! We then learned to watch the Tamils and do what they had been doing for thousands of years.

In 1972 we went to live in Fertile, and started re-forestation. At that time there were no trees, just an odd one here or there. I remember the fisherwomen running across the burning sand with baskets of fish on their heads to get shelter under the next tree, maybe a kilometre away. Our main priority was to get shade. We organized a bullock cart to continuously bring us up water from the village, and began to plant trees. We had no idea what we were planting, and
just grew whatever the government scheme gave us. The villagers thought we were crazy planting trees that didn’t give fruit or were not for firewood. As soon as a sapling was big enough they would come and cut it down for firewood. I got in many fights over that. They would bring their hungry goats up to eat our grass; our damming of the water stopped it flowing into their ponds ... they felt very threatened by us stupid new colonialists.

The land at that time was an arid desert due to generations of overgrazing, but they had worked out a system for survival with it. The rains were very dependable in those days, and after the first rains they would bring up bullock loads of compost and plough the land. On the second rains they would sow the seeds, and three months later they would come and harvest the ragi, black gram, peanuts and millet. It was reckoned that a villager needed two acres to feed his family and as many kids as possible to help him in the field. This pattern continued till the 1980’s, when India had an 18 million dollar World Bank Debt and Indira Gandhi started making changes. The government gave subsidies and encouraged the planting of cash crops, which in this area were cashews. A farmer could make 5,000 rupees growing millet or he could make 20,000 growing cashews; there was no choice. This changed everything, as the farmers were no longer self-sufficient but became cash croppers. They had fewer children and created the “South Indian miracle” in one generation, by reducing the size of their families from seven kids to three. These kids became educated, and are now the new consumers. Every time I go to Pondicherry I see a new sort of bicycle – Chinese or South Korean in endless varieties and colours.

I originally thought schooling was unnecessary, but eventually the kids said; “Johnny, we need a school.” They made their own desks in crazy shapes and we set up the Fertile School, which later joined Last School. The old school is now being resurrected as an art school where anyone can come and have the space to do funky things like sculpture, engraving, woodblock printing. I feel creative art now has a low profile in Auroville, and this building could provide a space for it. I love working with kids, especially at crazy theatrical projects, but my annual favourite is the Christmas Fair at the Youth Centre which Paul and I have done for 12 years now. I have acquired a weird collection of fairground games, such as giant punch bags and skittles, and am now making an adventure climbing frame for a school in Thiruvanamalai.

A group of us set up the Youth Centre, but it has always been a controversial place in many ways. It is in the wrong situation, and now the ring road will go through it. The kids built the place for themselves, and recently re-roofed the
kitchen and built a workshop. I think it is a living art school and there are some good artists there. You can see the difference compared with Kailash, the other place which was built for the kids to live in, which they don’t particularly feel involved with.

My main claim to fame, I believe, is the creation of the “capsule”. It is now even on the internet! It started with the invention of the portable toilet, which was filled within a few months, then had a tree planted on it, and the toilet moved to another spot. The women were complaining about lack of privacy, so I developed a simple crystalline, octohydren shape based on the triangle that could be moved around. Thus began the ubiquitous Auroville house. People came up to me and said, “I’d like one too”, so we began building them. They were like a self-contained portable space capsule; I guess nowadays they are called “pods”. I have made them in England, Moscow and Japan, and a few of the original ones still exist in Auroville. Tata, the Indian industrialist, came here years ago to have a look at Auroville and told Frederick; “The single best thing Auroville has done is develop the capsule.”

Now I am still living here in Fertile where I landed 36 years ago. It is still a sort of “Old McDonald’s Farm” with chickens and cows and half a dozen people living here. Of course Auroville has changed an awful lot and there are lots of big houses, but I believe we need all flavours, all variations for our city, and for an expression of Human Unity we need more than only white mid-Europeans. A Bombay film crew were here last year, and after looking around the place asked me, quite seriously, “Do you promote discomfort here?” I answered them something like; “Well, I grow my own vegetables, milk my own cows, and educate my own children. I think that’s a very comfortable way to live.” I don’t know what they thought.

I came here 36 years ago and somehow I stayed on. I have never looked back. I think it is all a matter of surrender, of realizing a situation, then just following your nose.