

The power of water and wasted opportunities

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I saw a couple of good examples of the powerful fascination water holds for children the other day while taking some time off in Tasmania, the island State of Australia (just thought I drop that in).

The first took place around the quayside in Hobart where a girl of about five years old was clearly fascinated by the reflections on the water that a bright morning was casting on the harbour surface. She was walking along the boardwalk beside the quay some way in front of her parents occasionally stopping and fixing a stare on a particularly interesting thing out in the waters but always set back from the actual edge.

During one of these pauses she suddenly took a few cautious paces forward to peer directly over the edge of the quayside ... and immediately took a double take. She looked around seemingly desperate to tell someone something before looking back into the water. She almost didn't notice her parents catching up with her as they strolled along chatting away but once she noticed she immediately turned to them, pointed into the water and exclaimed, "Starfish!" before looking back to the water again.

It was only afterwards when I reached this spot myself that I could see what she was talking about: the water was quite shallow and clear at this point and you could indeed see dozens of starfish – some big ones clambering over each other and others, much smaller, dotted around the seabed. She was right to be fascinated!

The second example took place later that same day on an area of decking jutting out into the Coal River slightly downstream from the oldest standing bridge in Australia in the town of Richmond (this 'oldest' bridge is dated 1825 which, I'm sorry Ozzy chums, but that made me chuckle a bit). On the decking where a couple with their four boys. At one point father and all four sons laid down on the decking and leaned over the edge together to peer into the water at close quarters which was immediately followed by a number of ooo's and ahhh's. Which is when the tirade began.

"Josh, head only over the edge, no shoulders" and, "Robby, no hands, take your hands out of the water!" The stream of instructions was constant and constantly negative. Lots of 'don'ts' and 'if you don't do as your told's'. The boys simply could not resist the temptation though and they paid for it. One by one they were told to come away from the edge for some misdemeanour and sit with their mother on the bank until eventually with a final, "I just don't understand why you can't behave yourselves and do as your told!" the last of the boys was banished from the water's edge (they had already been told off before the decking incident for paddling in a little slipway at the side of the river too).

The last I saw of this family was a sight of four bemused boys and two irate parents packing their stuff away to head off home because the boys "Could not be trusted" (that was just one of the muttered comments made as they stormed off). I had moved away from the decking before it got to this point because I realised how tempted I was to point out to these two adults why their boys could not contain themselves and note that they themselves were creating an impossible situation for themselves and their sons ... but it would have been ugly, so I didn't.

I'm not having a go at these parents, really I'm not (who in their right mind would not agree that four young sons is a bit of a challenge) but what these adults failed to acknowledge was just how powerful the attraction of this mysterious substance called water is for the inquisitive mind and body.

Starfish Girl didn't come off much better either. After exclaiming and pointing at the starfish her father, walking behind her and without missing a beat, took hold of her hand and gently pulled her away from the edge of the quay and continued walking and chatting towing a silently reluctant four year old with him. He didn't even notice what it was she had discovered.

In both of these cases water held a powerful fascination for these children and it lead to discoveries. And no small wonder because water is a unique material: nothing looks like it, feels like it, creates the colours, patterns and reflections that it does. Unfortunately, both these pairs of parents had an alternative agenda that day which overrode that of their offspring and without thinking they both wasted a fantastic opportunity to share in a little bit of wonder.

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5th September 2012

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This paper was originally written as a Blog on www.marc-armitage.eu in September 2012.

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