

Doggerel from the Drunkard's Walk

by H. W. Moss

It was my first year off planet when I heard this one. You'll just have to go along with my tempered version even though the slang was more imaginative and often anatomically precise. But that was only our fiftieth year off earth and maybe we were just a bit lustier then than now. However:

“Give us a broo, Cob.”

All back bar workers, be they terrestrial or other off planet sap (short for sapient in those days) were Cobs to a Spacer. There was no insult meant. Even if you called a sap a sap, I recall it was good natured for the most part. It was like we were all in it together, you know. Whatever “it” was.

But those words were a cue, too, and acted to alert any creature that had audio sensors to the fact the speaker was a returned out-rider. And if he had gone far enough into the least known reaches of interstellar space, he may well have returned from having “tested the envelope,” the riskiest venturing into the unknown a sap could do.

Man and his many intelligent friends throughout ten galaxies still had centuries of exploration ahead of them. A new face could take its place at the bar and call for broo and heads or what served as heads would turn in the direction of the speaker and a sort of silent alliance was formed.

It meant that here was one who had come back alive to tell the tale.

Every man or monkey who could talk was reverently listened to when he ordered up at the Drunkard's Walk / Brownian Motion. In those days you could learn something new from each trip out because every voyage was testing the envelope. We all aimed a little

farther into the star charts, challenged ourselves and our ships, got a little bit of red in before we had to shift blue and return.

Afterwards, the tales were told at the Drunkard's Walk and sometimes they held a kernel of truth in the re-telling. Occasionally you learned something important when a Spacer started talking, something that might save your hide if you ever ran across it yourself. Forewarned and all that.

There was a first round tradition practiced at the Drunkard's Walk in those days. Any Spacer who could lurch his way up to the newcomer would offer to buy. Myself, in this case. And, like I say, it was when I was only an ensign with the polish of the Academy still on me that I grabbed the opportunity to offer the first broo -- an Aldebaran import with an improbable taste that came in tankards about this size, as big as these pints we're sharing now.

I introduced myself and I must have seemed a bit cocky though dog nose I tried to be humble. I was a bit like yourself then: convinced of my own ability, but too young to realize how pompous I appeared to everyone else. There I was, a blustery young fool, in front of someone who should be able to teach a trick or two, but, like you, I just couldn't keep from acting like I was the demigod that the Winjib warrior caste of Gamon ought to worship.

This Spacer said he was VerHoef, descendant of true terrans and a proud heritage it was. Something Germanic followed as he saluted his broo and me, I think, for having bought it for him.

He had just made planet fall, he said, one of a dozen crewmen on a Volvo class ship and yes, he'd tested the envelope and it is dark and cold out there, he intoned.

If I remember anything about VerHoef it was the chilling way he had of looking at me and how he managed to scare me witless with his one-eyed stare and frighten me with his breath as he downed the pint of broo in one lungful of a gulp, set the empty flask down on the counter and began to tell of the esp distance he and his crew discovered on this latest trip to the fringe.

“But order us up another broo,” he said with a wink that took up the better part of his face, “and I’ll describe the esp distance as I’ve experienced it on the second planet of the Betelgeuse system.”

He waited until I paid before he continued:

“We’d about decided there was nothing with the brains above a trained dogfish down there. We were sure that world would soon become another mining camp. It would be over run with every credit hungry species that follows a First Fall. Of course, if we could find a higher intelligence, one on a level with or greater than any of your local garden variety saps, sovereignty would revert by charter and the planet would be off limits until trade agreements and Federation stewardship could be set up.

“Jocko was our naturalist, so it was reasonable that he spotted the dominant species first. He gets credit for discovering the esp distance, too, I suppose. And he will also get kicked up a grade or two for recognizing that our old standard of intelligence which rested on a sort of ability-to-build-a-fire rule was no longer a test for sentience.”

Right, son, I know that rule covered a lot of ground, but that’s what they used as a rough guide in those days. I can’t begin to tell you how wrong it was.

“I must say modestly,” VerHoef told me as he displayed anything but humility when he puffed up his chest and quite uncharacteristically demonstrated a personal vanity that

by rights he earned with this new discovery, “I will say that our detection of the esp distance is going to break that build-a-fire law and give us a damn wider view of what constitutes Federation inclusion.

“Anyway, here’s how that happened. Jocko spotted a critter from his ram-boat about the last day we were planet side. He’d seen packs of the animals before, but there were never any individuals, always groups. They traveled all the major land masses on the entire planet, but they built no permanent structures and had absolutely no form of social order we could ascertain. When we landed ram-boats near them they fled and short of shooting one we had no specimens. Nor did we want one if they were as dumb as they appeared to be.

“This particular creature musta got separated from the herd it usually traveled with, so Jocko thought it a fine opportunity to get a close-up examination before lift off.

“He called in his position and told us he was dropping in on this one, the collective name for which we had come to refer to as lions. That’s kinda what they looked like. Our reports all described them as leonine although they were as far away on the evolutionary scale from the earth-side feline as a stick is from a stone.

“Jocko thought the creature might be dangerous, so he tranquilized it for this more thorough up close examination. After taking one more aerial look-see to be sure none of the rest of the herd were in stalking distance, he lowered the ram-boat beside the sleeping creature to man handle it and take his samples.”

VerHoef’s voice lowered in appreciation for what his shipmate had accomplished.

“Y’see, Jocko was the first to describe the ‘esp distance.’ I remember how he looked when he got back after being out of communication for hours. Sort of a beatific smile on

his face and the sappy story of how he had helped one of the natives -- NATIVES he called them! -- return to its kindred. And then Jocko went all barmy and got lost in some biblical clap-trap trying to make out like he was a modern day Daniel who had just pulled a thorn from a lion's paw!"

VerHoef emptied yet another broo, his third by my reckoning, and stood there fixing me with his one good eye. I fulfilled the obligatory but unspoken request even as he stared at me, silent, awaiting one more pint before he would continue.

I had yet to finish my first I was so rapt attentive.

Which reminds me, you'll owe me another when I finish this story tonight 'cause kee-rist I've been working hard to get to the point where I could tell you that what Jocko discovered, this esp distance, is common knowledge today. It is the measurable distance between two conscious minds and their individual telepathic ability. That's what Jocko discovered in his own fumbling way.

Ah, now I have your attention. You recall the psi studies of herd or hive or group minds, don't ya? You've heard that all sentient species are supposedly able to send and receive psi projections? But humans and most of the other intelligent races up to that time had such undeveloped psi ability they required amplifiers if they were to communicate with each other.

Admit it. We have limited psi ability or you'd see this coming, but that's not part of my story. On this expedition, according to VerHoef, they discovered the first of several subsequent civilizations now known to use group consciousness to project and focus thought transfers.

What VerHoef and Jocko and the rest of the expedition had mistaken for subsentience was to prove to be a more highly developed intelligence than anyone ever suspected. Some would argue it is a level above our own, but that is not part of my story either.

The important point that is part of my story is there is a specific distance beyond which members of this species could not communicate. If they were too far apart from each other, they were out of range.

And the lion-like creature Jocko reached out and touched in order to trundle it up and maybe even take it back to base had, although tranquilized, communicated with him.

“So Jocko touched this creature,” VerHoef continued, “and he closed the gap, the esp distance between their minds. It was because Jocko’s and all the other members of the crew had latent psi, these creatures were not able to communicate with them. Until Jocko grabbed a leg, that is.

“Afterwards, what Jocko had to say for himself was ridiculously sentimental as far as I was concerned. He claimed to have shared the mind of the beast. Then he told how the creature explained that it was lost and could Jocko please do it the favor of picking it up and flying it to the group which was some kilometers distant and out of range of its own not so very strong psi ability.

“Jocko did this and was introduced to the group. I can just imagine that skinny bastard running around touching the creatures on their hind ends and communicating with them through his mind!

“And Jocko explained to the herd who we were, why we were there, what we were all about and right then and there he claims he set up a deal for the Federation. The Group

said, yes, it would be just ducky if we wanted to mine their planet. They would be pleased as kittens to join the other intelligent races in space and make fair trade agreements just so long as we did it all nice and legal with proper mining colonies and protected claims and kept the hoot-and-goldbrick out.”

At which point, VerHoef again drained his broo and slammed his container down on the bar with a resounding clangor that made me suddenly aware that every ear in the place, the Cob’s, all other Spacer ears, the other members of sapient races who were in the bar and had audio sense, they all leaned in our direction.

They were waiting for something. I thought maybe they expected a fight to break out. Then I realized they were listening to VerHoef and had been for some time.

I had no idea what to expect next when VerHoef again tore a hole in his craggy face by winking at me. He concluded his tale with a line that cost me another broo and will cost you one, too, old son.

“That’s the reason,” VerHoef said, “why I like to say: The shared esp distance between two pints is a strayed lion.”

The entire Drunkard’s Walk burst out laughing at my expense.

Now you can buy me another round.

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