

REFLECTIVE PIECE

Where the wild things are

THURSDAY is my day with Ollie.

He's 3 years old and likes wandering off. We usually go bushwalking in the hills of Perth, and he'll be happily doing his own thing, chatting away to himself, and then I will notice that he has quietly disappeared. If I call out to him, he'll amble back holding a bunch of sticks for a 'fire' or more rocks than he can comfortably handle.

My own parents worked full time, and so my own 'day with dad' would have been a Sunday afternoon when he would take me fossicking at our town's enviable free-range rubbish tip, my mother having given us a shopping list of desirable items in exchange for a few hours of peace and quiet. Mining towns – with their long hours and short-term contracts – made for a lot of high-value pickings, after all. It also meant, however, that if someone at school specifically mentioned that they had a set day with dad, it was invariably code for their parents being divorced.

I have the beauty of being in a different time and in a job that allows me to have these days. I get to be a GP, and I get to have my Thursdays. I also often expand on the fatherhood front, as these bushwalking adventures are usually accompanied by my father-in-law, Wence. I bring Ollie and our recalcitrant labrador; Wence brings his hiking pole and amiable cavoodle.

With the colder months comes the quiet emergence of wild orchids, many of which only grow in their own particular geography or flower for a few weeks before completely disappearing until the following year. If you miss that narrow window in time, or don't go when the sun is out, or don't scramble through hills and scratching branches – you won't have the chance to see them bloom. As such, stories from those who have seen them recently or the memory of previous years tell us where to go for that day.

There's something about being in the bush watching a grandfather be completely at peace in the presence of his grandson. Even when we can't walk further because Ollie has decided to meticulously turn over rock after rock, delighted when he finds a different kind of ant, there is a great deal of joy in the old man's face.

Wence is also a career GP, as was his father. My wife became the apple that rolled away from the tree when she became an emergency physician, but she did have the wherewithal to at least marry into the GP world.

Wence was the youngest in his medical school and then was working full time as a GP from the age of 24 years. He was on call day

and night. He delivered babies and did house calls. He then went on to work 12-hour days for many years, attending to the needs of those who sought out his help and skills in their moments of need. From all accounts he was a wonderful GP, and despite being retired, he still talks about his lifelong patients and their stories like a custodian of their memory.

When I was 24 years old, I had a history degree that I was putting to good use each day by scrubbing magpie crap off the outside tables of a historic pub feeling that there was more to life. Upon entering registrar training in my early 30s, I recall being warmly welcomed into the profession by a retiring GP at my first practice who went on to apologise that I was sadly arriving into it at the 'end of the golden age of general practice'.

The contrast between my arrival and desires in medicine and those of Wence's generation could hardly be starker. It has always been easy to look around and criticise what comes next; to say that the next generation has it too easy or too hard – simultaneously not working enough and yet still somehow at risk of burnout. It is reasonable that those who have invested so much in something feel cynical when they see it as changing out of their control.

My walks with Wence have shown me the opposite. A sense of happiness for the future. A sense of pride in handing over a baton and watching the next generation, whatever they look like, grow into their own identities. Ever the GP, he still continues to ask me about my medical cases as his way of a hello, followed shortly after with clinical discussions and management options for whatever I've stumbled across that week.

However, he has also only just recently gotten to really experience and relish what it is like to watch a little kid grow and learn from week to week in the light of day. Both he and I, as well as Ollie, are all learning together for the first time.

The future of general practice will become what it becomes. But wildflowers only last a season.

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