

BUSINESS AS USUAL

by Jeanne Carney

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A minor exchange in the recent Del Mar election campaign led me on a merry chase. It was nothing very dramatic that set me on my meanderings: it takes no more than a few bars of music, a vanishing scent of perfume or a slight phrase to propel us into the most unexpected journeys of association. In my recent adventure, all it took was reading that one candidate for Del Mar City Council had listed as supporters people who live or “do business” in Del Mar. Afterward, another resident objected, on the grounds that outside business interests should not influence happenings in the city. Something about the plainness, the down-to-earth look of the phrase “do business” sent me off and running—back to the Middle Ages, finally all the way back to meaning!

A quick check confirmed my first thought: of eight major categories of definitions listed under the word *business* in my *Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary*, only one deals specifically with commercial activity, with trade and exchange for profit. The other seven relate to the ancient and much more established usage of the word to denote appropriate or purposeful activity of some kind. Suddenly I remembered an incident on our farm near the Kentucky border, where I grew up after the Great

Depression—which doesn’t look so “Great” any more, of course. Nevertheless, much “purposeful” labor was devoted to growing crops. As the soil was spare and mostly rocky, what arable land there was had to be cultivated with diligence: everybody, everything was expected to work and wear well. Even words had to serve, and certainly the models of English read daily, memorized, from the King James Version of the Bible transmitted strength and power. My father knew the flow and charm of words, having a certain elfin strain of Celt, but he also loved the silences of streams, the ways of crops, animals and just plain folk. He was not given to newfangled rhetoric or excessive talking: when he said something, it counted; and you listened.

One hot summer day, I had been sent to hoe peas and early-planted corn. I worked for perhaps an hour, sweating (“perspire” was what city people did), shifting uncomfortably in the heavy humidity. Suddenly I caught sight of something that promised escape; under a shady oak nearby, I saw a tumblebug—or such was the farm diction. Later, in college biology, I learned that these creatures were more correctly called “dung beetles,” but whatever you call them, they were endlessly fascinating, like caterpillars, tadpoles and red fox kits. Tumblebugs seemed to spend most of their time rolling round and round, down but seldom up—climbing wasn’t their forte—in the course of which purposeful activity they collected mud daubs, leaf strips, particles of rock. There would be sudden unexplained stops—and then the dervish swirling would begin all over. With all these stops and starts, a prime specimen in good condition

might cover the distance of a foot or two in an hour.

I hunkered down for a better look. Tumblebugs were good at rolling. I was a skinny eleven-year-old and hunkering was one of the things I did best. I wondered what the tumblebug could be thinking about. Maybe he was a she; I had a good chance—the thought thrilled me to death—of going away to college, but what kind of future did a female tumblebug have? I was speculating about this matter when a familiar shadow fell on the ground beside me. My father loved children, especially his child who was full of questions. He believed that bread cast forth upon the waters has a way of floating back to you on those same waters, sooner or later; but being a good farmer, with just enough practicality to balance things, he knew we couldn't eat tumblebugs or butterflies. So he leaned down to my level, and spoke slowly, softly: "Don't you think you better get back to your business?" (He pronounced it so that it sounded something like "bid-ness.")

From the tumblebug episode, I was transported to that treasury that stands in relation to English as Fort Knox stands in relation to our gold supply—the multivolumed *Oxford English Dictionary*. This is the place to begin any search for English word origins, histories, meanings. Since our plainest workaday language is basically Anglo-Saxon, I wasn't surprised to learn that our word "busy" came from the old English-old Dutch adjective *bezich*, *bisig* or *bysig*, but it seems that there is no cognate word in any other Teutonic or Aryan branch of the Indo-European family.

(Do English-speaking peoples, then, have a monopoly on a special kind of "busy-bodiness"?) Not one of the eleven main headings under *busy* relates specifically to buying, selling or trading; and of the twenty-four under *business*, only a few relate to commercial transactions. The core meaning is seriousness or purposefulness of activity or aim—though one interesting archaic usage includes "mischief." Chaucer often uses "business," as in one poem in which he states that a certain knight had "full much business" before he won his lady. And Shakespeare's Macbeth says, "We would spend it in some words upon that business"—meaning "matter." Since *commerce* has been in use only since the sixteenth century, *merchandise*—accented on the second syllable—was used to mean "buying and selling goods or commodities for profit."

We move forward easily from medieval London to a narrowing strip of coast called Del Mar. In 1885, the name was borrowed from Bayard Taylor's "The Flight of Paso del Mar," a turbulent piece perhaps forecasting something of the clamorous events of this city. My husband, who grew up in the San Joaquin Valley, and "motored" with his family along Highway 101 (the *only* one), recalls a tranquil town, rural except for sea-sounds, with some houses scattered here and there on the hill, more strung along the beachfront and a clustering of cars (vintage 1930s) around the landmark, the Del Mar Hotel. Those sunny days of idyll—in South or West—being long past, what I have noticed during the last fourteen years is a change in the essential character of the community. We seem to have arrived at the end of an era. Del Mar before was

not particularly modish: the price of houses was moderate, and it was a place that was on the map—with “Queen for a Day” and the old hotel both gone—during the twin festivities of Expo and the thoroughbred-racing season. Then came the North County population explosion; a postage-stamp lot in Del Mar, with limited ocean view and crumbling sandstone underpinnings, suddenly became extremely valuable. It was at this point, I think, that another kind of greenery started to dominate the scenery, and the “business” of commerce and the “business” of living began their dramatic divergence.

When one considers the matter, the desirable natural and architectural charms of a community, and the lives lived in these surroundings, are actually composed of fragile elements, difficult to maintain, difficult to balance. One has to examine nearby communities to see vivid illustrations of this fragility, of the results of bartering away too much. Not long after our arrival, I went to City Hall and examined certain commercial beachfront proposals—these submissions being a matter of public record. Some of them—as at Laguna Beach—actually projected *over* the beach itself, shadowing the shoreline. At about the same period, a restaurant chain was planning—and came close, very close, to achieving—a restaurant and bar of more than one story on the land which became, thanks to community efforts and Council resistance, the first portion of Seagrove Park. Very little “grove” of any kind exists, but the public loves that park: it is used and enjoyed for everything from private celebrations—my own daughter was married there—to public concerts, the

latter bringing out residents, tourists and festive groups. Last year, one party behind us had a picnic complete with silver and porcelain service, gourmet dishes and well-chosen wine; the people in front had cold fried chicken, potato chips and beer. A grand time was had by all.

In contrast, I keep remembering my first visit to Laguna, where I stood on the main street and could neither see nor hear the ocean. I saw, instead, rows of high-rise hotels; I heard rumblings of traffic; and I smelled Kentucky Fried Chicken mingled with taco delights. How many recall the elaborate developments once planned for Crest Canyon? In Del Mar we have been spared such excesses—so far—largely because our chartered-city government (people had to work for that, too) has enabled City Council members to develop and implement policies beneficial to all Del Mar. This factor, primarily, has given the city its reputation as a highly desirable place to live, not—I would emphasize—its expensive houses, nor the false publicity given our so-called “elitist” attitudes.

A small step, semantically speaking, leads from “policies” to “policing.” While we may seldom think about the matter, the second is required to maintain the first. Yet the process of effecting policies for the public good has sometimes been labeled “repressive,” a word loaded with connotations which often reveal that something or someone is preventing us from doing exactly what we want. Remember that comic aria line “I want what I want when I want it”? With our habit of modifying language for personal uses, “repression” seems to be what is done to

us, never what we impose on others. Once, in Miami Beach, I saw groups of beachgoers darting between high-rise structures to search for needle-narrow passages leading to the sea; I have a feeling that residents in small older homes (near the beachfront or elsewhere) who have been cast in perpetual shadow by large looming structures feel somewhat repressed—and I doubt if that feeling goes away. One person's freedom from "oppression" may require another's "repression." It is best to admit these difficulties and others exist, to bring as much knowledge, insight and humor as we can to bear upon them. All of us as citizens must participate more in the elective process; and a larger turnout of residents at civic meetings and public hearings indicates the desire to take an active part in what happens here.

The present situation is not without ironies. I am told that merchants were fearful that completion of Interstate 5 would leave Del Mar an abandoned backwater town, whereas in the 70s it came to be an "in" place, with inflationary increases in housing and everything related. Another irony is that many of the talented university professional people drawn to live here in the 60s and 70s were startled to realize—somewhere in the mid-70s—that they would probably no longer qualify for a mortgage loan to purchase their own houses; these are residents who have worked for the community, some tirelessly, worked for schools and libraries and open space, many without owning anything in Del Mar other than their residences. And perhaps the ultimate irony would be to fail through too much success—too much preserved "charm," too many attractions to

tourism, development, speculation. Let's not make the mistake of thinking Del Mar has no more open spaces, no more buildable parcels. Just walk around in different neighborhoods for a week or two—or drive, and observe spots where entirely new structures could be placed. Notice several very large structures in process, or just being completed. Then imagine second- or even third-story additions or replacements for the many older one-level residences (called "quaint" in ads): such possibilities are no more remote than a few "simple" changes here and there in the General Plan [Community Plan], a few innocuous-seeming alterations to zoning ordinances and Floor Area Ratio restrictions.

Open space is highly valued here; people come for climate, sea air, beach and sun, scenery, recreation—most of all for "atmosphere." Though we can't define it precisely, we *do* know that it starts to go when some of the other factors are threatened. The biggest difficulty seems to be our inability to put a number on it; thus often it becomes apparent that when the business of living and the business of commerce clash, it's a head-on collision. The test of value, for example, of a racetrack season is a numerical one: size of attendance, amount of the take. How is it possible to apply that same standard to the value of the business of living? Too bad it's not a simple question of crime: if it were, we could erect an old-timey western pokey, appoint an honorary warden, have a contest for "Miss Law-and-Order" for that year, and call the whole thing—say—"The Good, the Bad, and the Beautiful." We could incarcerate the "bad guys"—perhaps even

save them from the lynch mobs. We would insist that even though that sulky prisoner over there behind bars stole our clean air, he's got a right to a fair trial. That woman's in for life; she murdered three adults (Torrey pines) in cold blood—waal, that there feller was caught in the act of trying to bulldoze the last Least Tern nest down near the wetlands.

Such events happen nowadays only on the glittery tube. Still, the lack of a common standard of measurement for evaluating the business of living as well as the business of commerce leads invariably to conflict—shoot-outs recorded at City Hall—between those who believe that most difficulties vanish, or are ameliorated, when the take is bigger, and those who believe that no amount of money will buy what is essentially unpurchasable—that is, a natural environment harmonious of living. One element directs activities mainly to developmental and commercial expansion; the other works through personal and group efforts, on a smaller scale, to preserve and enhance the quality of life shared in the community. Can Los Angeles with all its success purify its air? Can Laguna Beach compensate year-round residents for their diminished beach access, for paths and views surrendered to hotels, restaurants, multi-level commercial structures? Here again, money alone won't serve to buy what cannot be bought: we can own technology, but some things must be earned, over and over. One can be financially fortunate enough to buy a house—but must personally transform it to create a home. “Community” can be created only out of dedication and belief:

the form of citizenship without the function can become a very shallow thing.

Yet it is not difficult to understand, humans being “such stuff as dreams are made on,” how form and substance become hard to separate, here in this golden land. Contours, terrain, are alluring in themselves, and we are all trying in a thousand ways to find the path back to the Garden, to discover our own private postcard-view of Paradise. Perhaps, too, we live more in imagery than in “things.” Men drive Jaguars to preempt something of that magnificent beast's cunning, fluidity of movement—doubtless his sureness of attack. We cruise the King's Highway the king himself never traveled. High above me, pennant bravely rippling, is a castle—an authentic southern California Moorish castle with thick stucco walls, turrets and battlements, and a Round Tower. I think the king is not in residence right now—but his banner waves above the tower as a reminder of the perquisites of royalty. In our dreams we fly like eagles. Is it surprising that our money is the deep serious green of growing things? Or that people sometimes confuse the two greens? After all, our paper greenery is imbued with presidential images, an all-seeing eye and pyramid power!

Not long ago I overheard one Del Martian tell another—the speaker was peeved when he said it, but obviously sincere—that he himself owned a larger stake in the city than the second because his taxes were higher and his house had cost him \$200,000 more. Many may agree with the irritated speaker—just as many are convinced that larger cars have a right to more of the road. I wonder what he would have to say about

the rights of the elderly lady—she must be in her eighties—who walks the hills and byways of Del Mar? She must walk for hours at a stretch, as I have observed her in sections of town far separated, at different hours, under sunny or overcast skies. She is slight but sturdy, wears the classic white sneakers, and a cardigan over a housedress. She steps along in a manner neither fast nor slow, but certainly firm for her age. Several times she has given me a slight smile—it could be a smile of triumph: though I consider myself a fair walker, she surely has me beat!

This lady is engaged in serious purposeful activity in Del Mar; and I believe that she daily earns the right to natural beauty, to greenery, to sea-views and breathable air. She deserves the power of Torrey pines to cool and shelter with their five-fingered fans, to filter and absorb noises from the freeway. Sometimes I happen upon a delightful view, unexpected, giving me what the French call “a blow to the eye.” Then I think of all the people engaged in business in Del Mar at that very moment: people walking to the market, or the post office, and getting a bonus view. Some are cooling themselves, cooking outside, in shaded patios; some are playing volleyball at the beach, others more meditatively watching nudibranchs in a tidepool. One group saunters home from school, bookbags dragging, as another hurries to twilight class. At the park, readers pore over pages; seagazers follow in their minds that late golden suntrack to the Orient.

Yesterday I hurried home from my walk to hang out shirts. There was a brisk breeze, full of sunshine—full of sea-spice, with just

a hint of its briny source. It was the kind of wind that sets shirts to dancing a stiff-armed clog, and dries them in no time. On a day like this—the sea will claim those clothes, will mark them, so that later the dank interior of my closet will for a while contain the sweet-salty musk of ocean. And in the morning when I open the closet door, that same fragrance will remind me of my good fortune in living beside it.

Even our clouds are special here: sometimes, during sunsets, there is a vivid streak—never a large area, but just a subtle slash of luminous green one does not expect to see. Perhaps the man who owned more of Del Mar wouldn’t put a value on this strip of ocean lifted up to the sky, yet it gives me a thrill of pleasure just to remember it. And I enjoy remembering that solitary walker. As I shook out clothes, I realized that I hadn’t seen her in some time. Perhaps it was because I had been ill and not walking much. Could she have moved away? Suddenly the delicious breeze seemed a little *too* chilly. I don’t know her, but we never really spoke—just smile; but I hope she’s still around to enjoy this lovely city of the sea, by the sea, for the people.

If I never catch sight of her again, we still have a bond: she and I belong to the same club, are linked by the fact that both of us do business in Del Mar. There is no more serious business than ours. Several years back, a San Diego newspaper called the Friends of Del Mar a “radical activist environmentalist” group; this was a highly inventive label, conjuring up visions of John Thunen, say, charging down Camino Del Mar, his silver locks tousled, brandishing a Molotov cocktail in one hand. If my

assertion of these rights—the solitary walker’s, my own—make me a radical activist, so be it. As far as I can see, I am just attending to business—business as usual in Del Mar.

Jeanne P. Carney, who was in her late 90s when she died in June 2021, was born and grew up on a small family farm near the Kentucky border in northern Tennessee. She comes from a line of several hundred years of mountaineers and homesteaders, some of whom crossed from North Carolina through Cumberland Gap. In her childhood, traditional Anglo-American folk music—including ballads and folksongs, hymns, fiddle tunes and play-party pieces—formed a vital part of rural experience. She holds a doctorate in English literature and linguistics, and has taught university courses in Anglo-American balladry and folksong. [Photo: Jeanne Carney performed on May 4, 2000 for the Del Mar Foundation’s inaugural First Thursdays performance at the Del Mar Powerhouse Community Center, presenting a program of “Ballads and Bluegrass from the Southern Uplands.” (Quilt handmade by Sherryl Parks; photo courtesy of Del Mar Foundation.)

