

Ozzie and the Snortlefish

An evolutionary parable

by Denny O'Neil

ONCE UPON a very, very long time—438 million years ago, more or less—there lived an ambitious young fish. His real name was *Panderichthys elpistostege*, but since that's a bit hard to say, we'll call him Ozzie. Ozzie did pretty much what his brothers, sisters, and cousins did, which was to putter around the bottom of a pond, looking at the sand and dirt, waving his fins and trying to keep from being eaten by larger fish. That was what fish did in those days, and in these days, too.

One morning, Ozzie was skimming along the ooze at the bottom of the pond when he met a Snortlefish named Kumpfrumple. Kumpfrumple had no friends because he was an extremely rude fish, as well as being lazy, ill-tempered, and occasionally flatulent; but if he had had friends, they would have called him "Kump" for short, and so shall we.

Kump opened one eye, looked at Ozzie and said, "Hey stupid. You think you're better than me, right?"

Ozzie replied, "I beg your pardon?"

"Those things growing out of your body," Kump said, waving a very flat fin in Ozzie's direction. "The rest of us fish don't have those, so you must think you're better than us."

Ozzie looked down at two stout appendages which jutted from his flanks. "Oh these," he said. "You're wrong when you say I'm the only one who has them.

Actually, a lot of my relatives seem to be growing them, too."

"What are they good for?" Kump asked.

"I've been wondering that myself," Ozzie answered. "Mostly, I use them to help guide myself around the pond. I also rub them in the dirt and sand, which can be fun if you're in a certain mood, but mostly, I just use them to push and pull."

"Sounds dumb to me," Kump said.

"But last night I had a dream," Ozzie continued. "I dreamed that some day I'll climb out of the water and onto the stuff that surrounds the pond. The not-water."

"Stuff that surrounds the pond!"

Kump muttered. "Preposterous!"

Ignoring him, Ozzie said, "These strange things"—he wiggled the appendages—"will grow thicker and stronger. I'll use them to raise myself up and move about the not-water by putting one in front of the other."

"I don't know..." Ozzie murmured.

"Walking?" How does that sound—'walking.' I think it has a certain ring to it. If you ask me, it could catch on."

"That's it? All that trouble just to do this 'walking?'"

"Oh, no. We'll jump. We'll kick balls. We'll dance. We'll play ring-around-the-rosey."

"What does any of that mean?"

Kump demanded.

"I don't really know," Ozzie confessed.

"It all sounds stupid!" Kump said.

"And why would any sane fish want to do any of it?"

"To see. To learn. To explore. To understand. To become. I dreamed that we will change and change and change again. Some of us will soar high above the pond, some of us will become mighty creatures a hundred fishes high and some—"

"Go on, go on," Kump urged.

"Some will become smart. They will know who they are and why they exist.. They will understand everything that is and they will celebrate everything they understand."

"Sounds unlikely," Kump said.

"Maybe some of it is." Ozzie admitted. "And maybe not. We'll never know unless we climb out of the pond."

"Seems like a lot of bother with no guaranteed return. A smart fish will stay where he is and enjoy himself. Now swim out of here—or 'walk,' if that's what makes you happy. Me—I'm late for my nap."

That's the end of the story, but you may want to know a little of what happened next. That afternoon, Kumpfrumple was eaten and within a couple of hundred thousand years, a similar fate befell all the snortlefish, which is why nobody's ever heard of them. Ozzie never did get out of the pond, but later some of his descendants did. How much of the rest of his dream came true? That is yet to be seen.

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