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PREFACE

What is this book about?

Etched in my Australian childhood memory is a terrifying experience in the Sydney surf. Oblivious to the hidden danger of a smooth sea, I suddenly realised that I had been swept beyond my depth, a long way from the shore. I was caught in a rip. After finding my bearings, with youthful invincibility I began to swim back toward the beach. But no matter how hard I struggled, the shore continued to recede. Fortunately I discovered my plight before it was too late, and found that swimming across the current was the only way out.

This book aims to make sense of our battles with the similarly treacherous undertow of life's journey, as we try to make *wise* decisions in both our career and personal relationships. You will see that it does not aim to espouse another neat process for effective decision-making *per se*; there are plenty of expert textbooks and training programmes already available on that subject. Instead, the book addresses some of the hard questions at the root of our decision-making.

It started early last year, when I planned to take a month out to jot down any wisdom I may have gained through my attempts to buck the system. You probably need to know that I like to see myself as a bit of a radical, constantly tempted by the idea that 'if it's not broken, break it and put it back together again', and that

I continue to urge many other like-spirits to overcome their fear and challenge ‘the way we do things around here’. There is a downside of course; my wife accuses me of being a malcontent, so 37 years of marriage says much for her endurance.

I abruptly resigned from one of my first jobs after daring to question Big Ed, my Texan boss who loomed large in every way. A traditionalist prior to the advent of ‘political correctness’, he got away with saying that he had a mind to take me down the back of the woodshed for a good whipping. I was a slow learner. Later, after a short time in the UK, an old-school English boss diplomatically suggested it might be better for everyone if I returned to the colony where I belong.

Notably, I was never threatened with the sack, saved only by a few runs on the scoreboard and support from those around me. My lack of judgement was probably more to do with the manner in which I raised the difficult questions, so in later years I have focused on sharing some hard-earned lessons with the next generation of movers and shakers.

After a gruelling eighteen months of obsession, this little volume has finally emerged to explore three key challenges in the quest to make wise decisions. The first confronts the overpowering ebbs and flow of conventional wisdom, and helps to identify and reassess important working assumptions upon which we rely in our everyday lives. This leads to the second challenge, which deals with the way we think and engage with others. The third challenge tackles the practical implications of questioning entrenched opinions and having the guts to do things differently.

‘The conventional wisdom’ is a phrase introduced to the English language by eminent economist John Kenneth Galbraith, and wryly described by London *Financial Times* columnist John Kay as ‘opinions that, while not necessarily well founded, are so widely held among the rich and influential that only the rash and

foolish will endanger their careers by dissenting from them’. Most people agree that much of our baggage is received wisdom, adopted uncritically as we rush through life. The ‘uninquiring mind’, according to Kay, is what’s needed for the development of the conventional wisdom, which is:

... more common than ever today in business, in finance, in politics; in individuals who gain comfort from every cliché about the universality of globalisation, the transforming influence of information technology and the historic inevitability of liberal and active capital markets. But the academic or the lawyer is bound to ask questions such as ‘what does he actually think?’ or even ‘what is true?’

Why, though, should we leave it to the academics and lawyers to ask the hard questions? In your busy life, how frequently do you probe the prevailing view, deliberately asking questions rather than making statements? What’s more, how often do you go out of your way to encourage others to question you, in the hope that you might then see and do things in a different way?

Perhaps you have decided it’s not worth the aggravation, or feel similarly to Sir Winston Churchill who famously admitted: ‘I am always ready to learn, but I do not always like being taught.’ Some pretend they are open to challenge, but as Kay parodies, statements such as, ‘we would really like you to challenge our ideas’, should be treated in the same spirit as ‘tell me honestly what you think of my new dress’. This certainly rings true for me. Often the most articulate and apparently confident business leaders, when challenged on the run, appear confused regarding the basis of their thinking. They are quick to take umbrage, and yet impatiently complain ‘if only they understood me better’.

On looking back, clearly I too am guilty of being caught up in the cut and thrust of practical living, often at the expense of

pursuing the deeper issues. So what are these hard questions, and to whom do we turn for answers, both in the present and from the past? I have tried to glean a sense of the various pathways taken through history by some of the great philosophers, theologians and scientists, primarily via the short cut of analyses by those who have made such study their life's work. This is also expedient because my cognitive skills are not in the same league as an Aristotle, Descartes, Hume or Kant.

I have cited a range of people with very different views, some widely recognised and others not so. Of course there is also much to learn by carefully observing the ups and downs of ordinary lives encountered every day. To the people who have knowingly or unknowingly helped me on my way, thank you. It is encouraging to remember the old axiom that some of the greatest heroes are unknown and unsung, unaware of their own significance.

Who should read this book?

This book is for anyone who is perplexed by the state of the Western world, seriously thinks about why this is so, and would like to do something about it. My main concern is for those people in their twenties and thirties, who will make decisions that shape the future. They may be budding lawyers, doctors, counsellors, politicians, teachers, NGO workers, clergy, academics, entrepreneurs, writers, film producers, consultants, or managers in business.

Picture, for example, an ambitious and influential young couple, both gym-fit, well educated and informed, enjoying business or professional careers. They have done very well and the future is full of promise and goals. They might even have one or two great little kids and try to share the load equally; or more commonly, one stays at home to juggle the domestic demands

with a continuing part time job. The other is a young manager who must deliver unrealistic targets, motivate a number of colleagues and participate in a wider team, often global, which requires a combination of travel and regular teleconferences at any time of the day or night. Heady and demanding stuff.

However, there is more to the picture for these loosely labelled Generation Xers, who have been led to believe by their baby boomer parents (dubbed Generation R for rest, recreation, and now recycled retirees) that they can have it all. Even though their combined pay package is pretty impressive, they still struggle to balance the budget, and fight perpetual tiredness.

They also struggle to make sense of a divided and battered world, because they have *a strong sense of social justice, a strong sense of 'right' and 'wrong', and aim to give their children a strong foundation for their lives.* Around them they see families fracturing and kids wilting under pressure. They experience harsh corporate initiatives shrugged off as 'commercial realities'. They don't trust their politicians or the media. They watch 'decent' young people from 'decent' families inflict unimaginable humiliation on others, in their own army barracks and far-flung places like Abu Ghraib; and they know only the intrusive power of television and courageous reporting prevent these images from being suppressed or spun.

They might support a charity, and are most definitely moved to respond generously to appeals for help in tragedies of the scale of the Asian tsunami. Yet they vote for tax cuts and increased expenditure on services, even though their government allocates a paltry amount for foreign aid, the starving, and the marginalised, and drags out the misery of refugees with no place to go.

Soothed by drive-time radio after another hard day, they might also tune in to debates about the economic, social, political and ethical questions of the moment. When they hear about the latest corporate scandal, they contemplate why apparently intelligent

and principled people can act corruptly whilst at the helm of important enterprises. And as they idle in the traffic, burning petrol, it is disconcerting for them to hear about the devastating effects of global warming.

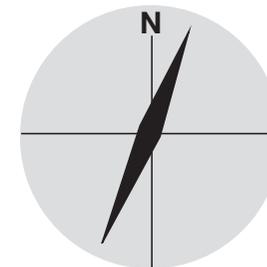
On the weekend they indulge in some well-earned retail therapy, nudge the plastic again, throw another steak on the barbie, down a cold beer with their mates, and bemoan the state of politics, the media, management, customer service, security queues and the traffic. When shocking statistics, news stories and movies overwhelm, they either shake their heads or shout, knowing they cannot be heard above the noise.

But they don't muck around; life must go on. They continually make decisions under pressure, the quality depending on their ability to identify the most viable options and choose 'the best one'. When it comes to religion, they may have some vague past experience, good or bad, but have long since discarded it as being of any practical use. Some of their friends may be experimenting with 'alternative' spiritual or philosophical ideas.

Is this profile comparable with yours, or others you care for and know well? If it is, this little family unit is one of the most crucial pillars of our society today, and will be even more so for the future. Whilst tapping away on the keyboard, you have been uppermost in my mind.

I am particularly conscious of our 'son-and-heir' Scott and his wife Kate, as they decide how to equip their two babies, Oliver and Emily, to make wise choices. In fact, this book is written to our three adult children (I refer to Prue and Edwina later – they straddle the Generation X and Y divide), living in a contemporary urban world and each of whom my wife and I are intensely proud. Hopefully some of the lessons arising from my predecessors and personal experience may help them make better decisions in their professional and personal lives, by anticipating a few of the inevitable pitfalls ahead.

UNDERSTANDING THE RIP



THE NEXT TIME you get on a plane, think about the navigator setting the direction. The challenge is similar to that of a swimmer in the rip of life – the positions of the departure and destination locations are set, and then allowance is made for the wind.

For those who are not mathematically inclined, 'position' is defined as the intersection between any two lines of an imaginary reference grid on the surface of the Earth. Longitude lines connect the north and south poles and latitude lines run parallel with the equator. Two numbers, called the position co-ordinates, are used to specify any location and are measured in degrees. The longitude line passing through Greenwich is deemed to be zero degrees, so any other line can be up to 180 degrees east or west of that line. Similarly, the line along the equator is set at zero

CAUGHT IN THE RIP

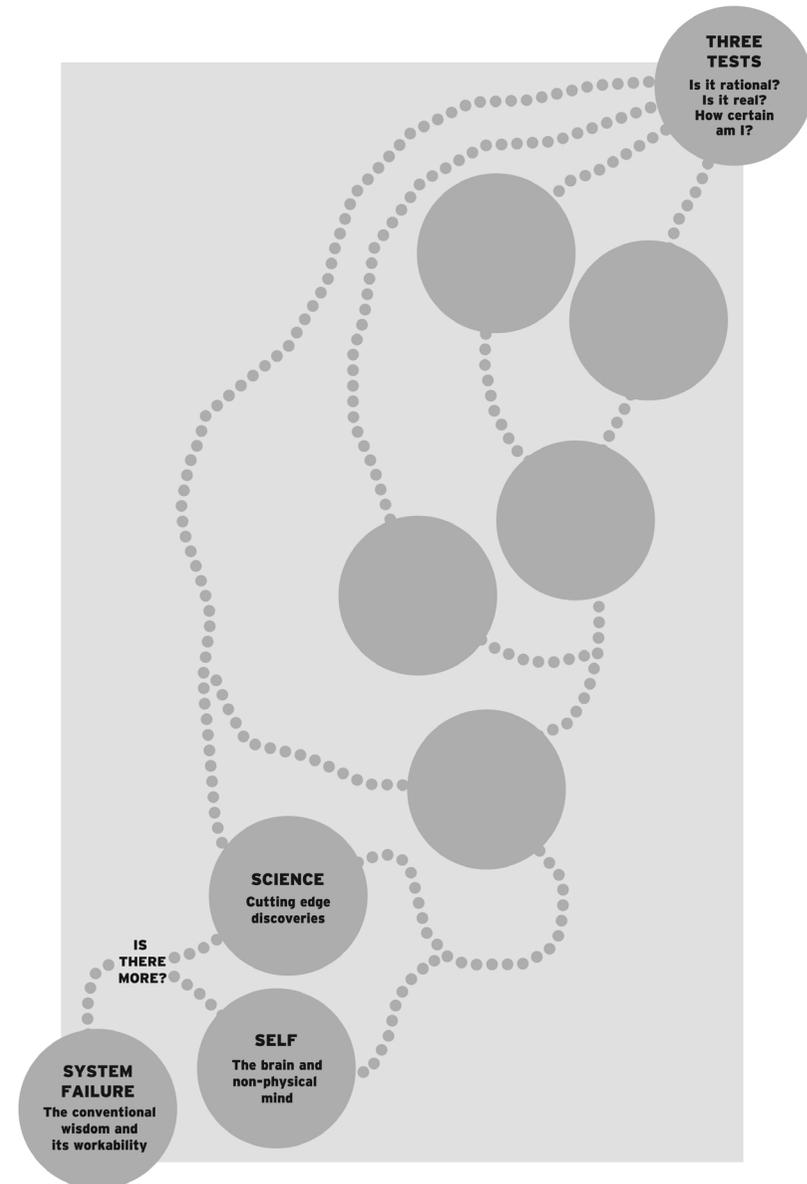
degrees, and any parallel line can be up to 90 degrees north or south of that line.

'Direction' is defined as the angular difference, measured in degrees, from a *specified reference direction*. For true or magnetic bearings that means true or magnetic north. (The needle on a handheld compass points to magnetic north, whose location slightly differs from true north and continuously moves.) For relative bearings it means the heading or the nose of the aircraft. Fortunately, to allow for the wind the navigator has a sophisticated computer that calculates the 'drift angle' for the plane to point into the windward side.

Navigating an aircraft is a useful metaphor when considering how we set the direction of our journey at work and at home. Do you make decisions against a 'specified reference direction', and if so, how is it determined? In other words, what is the equivalent of true north around which your reference grid or framework is constructed? If you suspect that your world might revolve around the ebbs and flow of conventional wisdom, the following is an evaluation of how this informs decision-making, which draws heavily on the lessons of modern business – as already suggested, one of the most powerful influences on today's society.

Many of the deepest dilemmas confronting our torn world are brought to the surface, indicating that we are experiencing 'system failure' in the secular West. Prompted to seek new insights into how we can regain our true bearings, we then investigate what psychologists, neurologists and other masters of the mind think. Why? Because in our psychology-obsessed society, many believe that the answers lie within us.

If still perplexed, we can continue to follow our irresistible urge to rely even more on science, where very bright people and objectivity are expected to reign. Hence the evaluation of where cutting edge scientific thinking may be leading us in our quest for answers to the big questions.



CAUGHT IN THE RIP

A case for intelligent design of the universe emerges, and when combined with the existence of morality, raises the tantalising question of whether there is an ultimate source, and hence an ultimate fixed reference point or reality.