



How on Earth did you Manage that?

It's been quite a journey to date, from that baby brought home in the depths of a dark and severe Yorkshire winter, to my penultimate twig on the oak tree of life, under never-ending tropical skies in Kenya. A journey, perhaps not that remarkable by some people's standards, but one which I look back on and wonder at times: "How on earth did you manage that?"

I remember my very good friend and mentor, *John Davidson*, turning his head to me on his deathbed and murmuring, "*George, I don't know how you do it.*" This surprised me at the time, as I knew John in his earlier life had risen to far greater heights than I ever managed to achieve. But now having recently surpassed the age at which he died, I can begin to understand that some of life's tasks do appear more daunting, when viewed from the far end, in contrast to the moment of doing, when we approach them without too much of a second thought.

So let me wander back through those more memorable challenges, which at the time seemed run-of-the-mill events, to be faced regardless, but looking back appear more like Everest to an ageing Hillary. In so doing I will attempt to recall incidents thus far unmentioned, which exemplified the challenges faced, and the comparative ease with which they were accomplished (or not accomplished in some cases). These are encounters, not so much to do with outside forces that suddenly decide to descend, but more concerned with our own capability to meet everyday circumstances.

To begin: a simple task confronted on a regular basis, way back in that boyhood stage when life seemed a bed of roses. It remained largely unaccomplished.

This particular challenge centred on learning (or not learning) to play the piano. Someone in my family circle had turned up a piano teacher who was said to be a mistress of the art. This sweet, little grey-permed lady – Miss Maughan – lived in a tiny terraced cottage, that I reached each week after a steep climb up from the river estuary in the Cornish tourist village of *Looe*. Every Wednesday I jumped down from the school bus and half-walked, half-ran, alongside the boat-strewn river, turning in past the 500-year-old *Jolly Sailor* pub, then proceeding to climb - huffing and puffing with a laden school satchel on my back - up the steep, narrow incline to my destination: No. 124, with its cute little flower garden and seaside blue door: all picture postcard stuff (to which I was totally oblivious). Each week I used the heavy metal knocker to signal my arrival.

The backroom window in the doll's house offered a glorious view over the river, with perhaps a dozen fishing boats moored to the quay, in the light of the setting sun glistening on the water. The room was just big enough for a black *Steinway*, along with a well-worn, flower-patterned armchair, on which - for almost all my visits there - slept an enormous, and extremely fluffy, black and white cat. There was a piano stool to match, together with a wooden chair, where my tutor would sit, craning over my shoulder to discern how much practice I had *not* done since our previous meeting.

The challenge was twofold: my elderly tutor grounded in a bygone era, and me at the other extreme, beginning to veer off the rails into teenage land. Piano practice came a long way down the hit list, compared to grooving with Elvis Presley, Chuck Berry and Cliff ... or even more appropriately in this instance, Jerry Lee Lewis. Endless scales and those early piano pieces – that many pupils probably still face even today - just did not gel with me at that moment in time. Perhaps if I had learnt to play *Great Balls of Fire*, being allowed to jump around on the keyboard a bit, things might have progressed more rapidly! I possessed the talent and had a musical ear (handed down from my mother), but the simple fact was that for me, there was no magic in the tried and true method. Sorry Miss Maughan, I know you tried.

So after these weekly happenings – a torturous hour in the late afternoon sun of summer, or pitch black of winter – I would trudge back across the bridge to catch the toy train along the Looe Valley, back to the family farm, and home; each time more and more disillusioned by the whole affair. This mild mutiny against piano lessons was just the start. By the time *The Beatles* arrived a few years later, I was anti anything to do with establishment or tradition (as I guess many of a similar age were at that time). But ever since then, I have to admit watching with envy, anyone who emerges from the throng to tinkle the ivories with the ease of a Dudley Moore or Elton John. It's then that I inwardly reflect on something I could have achieved, but decided to flunk.

Remarkably, about 30 years later I put one of my daughters through similar torture, insisting she be taught the flute by a senior citizen: a lady who was also a stickler for scales and all those accompanying torments. It was déjà vu. Like me, so many years before, my daughter learnt in the sitting room, next to the tutor's *Steinway*, with a flowery armchair in the corner. On collecting her from the lesson one day, I found her in tears; then I was finally awoken by my own experiences, and immediately encouraged a shift to learning the cello at her school, with a group of other kids the same age. It seems we often try to inflict aspects of our own undoing, onto our nearest and dearest.

About ten years further down the track I hit a new challenge, which revolved around seamless assimilation into the Australian way of doing things. In particular it was all about learning the ability to integrate into a team of workers, starting with my first real job down under, and ending with my last one in Africa: a never-ending process, where experience built on experience.

The supposed seamless assimilation began when I was thrown into the melee of a large group of bronze Aussie males at post-secondary college. The focus was on agriculture – or farm management to be more exact – and my newfound role models were almost all silver-spooned youths, coming from a legacy of land ownership. I arrived in their midst as that fresh-off-the-boat, freckle-faced *Pom*: pale-skinned, with an accent to match.

I quickly found I had an ability to blend in at varying levels, meaning I was to some extent able to mirror the person or persons I happened to be mixing with. This was a big asset in terms of adaptation to new cultures and unfamiliar customs. In addition, surrounded by a posse of nasal-voiced Aussies under the hot southern sun, meant that within a year, I was beginning to look and sound as if I too was born and bred on a massive outback sheep station. A third advantage was spawned by my background, as it became evident that no-one the world over could resist the trend set by the *Mop-Top Four*, and my swinging England birthplace: not even a cow-cocky from Kalgoorlie.

So with successful absorption of Australiana behind me, I moved on to become one-seventh of a young team set up to research and advise farmers across south-eastern Australia. An intriguing aspect was that my one-seventh was very different to the remainder: the other six all hailing from a more orthodox state-run college, whereas I parachuted in from something regarded as a fly-by-night private affair. And of course, I felt somewhat outnumbered; perhaps the reason I was plucked from the group's midst and whisked off to work alongside the boss in the next-door state: South Australia.

A much more serious integration came about a decade or so later, when I won a competitive contest to attain membership of a cross-Australia advisory team, set up by the conglomerate, ICI. Here, there was more of an age range, but similar to the group I had joined for my first job, this post had a technical remit, and we worked together as a higher echelon unit, above and beyond the company's general marketing stream.

The major skill that this position provided – for re-use in an ongoing career - was just how to mastermind major meetings, with hundreds of people in attendance: the complexities of planning a venue, coordinating the agenda and organizing the publicity, plus a million other facets that en masse, enable a meeting to produce the expected outcomes. Learning this all-round complex skill gave me a lot of starter headaches, but eventually I came to master the art, so that what seemed nightmarish at first, became par-for-the-course further down the line.

This turned out to be especially useful when I transited to the NGO world of aid and development, which seems to specialize in a rapid turnaround of meetings of all shapes, sizes and denominations. My finale on the job front in Kenya required me to coordinate a process that cascaded environmental education, from trainers, to teachers, to students, then on to the kid's parents and other community members, with appropriate meetings at each juncture, across two major urban areas, Nairobi and Mombasa. And though it all presented as a rather complex undertaking, after my 30-plus years in training, I was able to view it as a comparatively straightforward assignment, and knew instinctively that I would be equipped to meet the challenge with relative ease.

Then in the mid-1990s I stumbled on a very personal challenge to my own well-being, which saw me doubling down to summons the courage that could meet this threat from within.

It all started with a fairly innocuous checkup, to find out why I was experiencing some tingling in my fingertips. After a number of nerve tests to try to identify the source of the problem, and during a final check, the doctor happened to ask: *“Do you realise you have a rather large lump just above your collar bone?”*

A month or so further down the track I received results back from the biopsy, which confirmed the swelling that had been spotted by chance was indeed due to a form of *Thyroid Cancer*.

I recall the news hit me like a bombshell, similar to opening that envelope twenty years before, to find the contents telling me the person whom I believed to be my sister, was in fact my mother.

“Me? ... Cancer? ... That’s not possible! There had never been anything seriously wrong with me for the previous 47 years. Why should anything change now?”

But like a million or more other people in the same situation, after a while I had to believe the experts and acknowledge that my body was indeed fallible, and that I, just

like everyone else, could be susceptible to cancer, or heart attack, or any other demon of the body human which happened to chance by.

Then, out of the onrushing doom and gloom there came a little reprieve. In short, it turns out that *Thyroid Cancer* comes in three forms: deadly, serious and slightly-less-than-serious. I apparently had the slightly-less-than-serious version. Still not to be trifled with, but none-the-less, possible to negotiate and defeat.

Some twenty years later, I did happen to wonder (though I have to say rather flippantly) if this was not just fate, but perhaps had something to do with an aura of protection which, I had been told by an Italian- Kenyan friend, I possessed. It surrounded my body, he had said, to ward off deadly happenings like car crashes and drownings. But those were external threats. How on Earth could an aura of protection work for something that was already formed, inside the protective layer?

Back in the real world of the 90s, I recall waiting with a couple of others in the '*holding pen*', before being wheeled into the operating theatre, and then, when supposedly out for the count, waking briefly to see a clutch of bodies in white coats and boots, all busily gathered around me. For once in my life I had become the centre of attraction!

Afterwards, under 24-hour surveillance - and I guess in some state of delirium - I fell in love for a day or two, with one of my carers: a red-headed young woman of Irish descent, who spoke with a soothing Aussie twang (If there can ever be such a thing). She was the one, I remember, who carried this steaming radioactive pill into my room, gloved and masked and holding the thing at arms-length, for me to swallow. Why, I wondered, if its so dangerous for her to even be near, am I allowed to consume the thing. The wonders of science (and my own medical ignorance) never cease to amaze!

After a few days I was released from the Royal Adelaide Hospital, and my first recollection is of walking along the beautifully treed street outside, looking up at the cotton-wool clouds, and watching leaves floating down to the footpath, almost in slow

motion. For a moment in time, it felt as if I had been to the other side and returned to find the magnificence of a world which had seemed lost to me, for a few days at least.

I remained in a state of euphoria for a week or two, until one day I received a telephone call that I can never forget. It was the hospital. In the operation they had removed only one thyroid gland (we all have two: one at each side of the lower neck). But now I was told, they had examined the tissue and were advising that I should also have the second gland removed. It was my choice.

This came as a body blow and presented a huge dilemma. The last place in the world I wanted to return to at that point in time, was the operating theatre at Royal Adelaide. To re-live that experience just a few weeks after the initial ordeal, was an exceptionally daunting thought. On top of that I realized my body could function comfortably with one thyroid gland (in the same way we can operate with one kidney) but removing the second gland would leave me dependent on drugs for the rest of my life. It was a hard decision, but in the end there was no choice: I had to meet the challenge and face up to that same operating theatre and that same medical process, a second time round.

“Well,” I thought to myself, “It’s a bit of a bummer, but at least I’ll get to see the love of my life once again!”

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On reflection, I can only presume we all have these defining moments at some stage in our lives. Whether or not we like to convince ourselves that escape from premature demolition was enabled by some protective layer that surrounds our body, is another thing altogether. Because I refuted religion as a reality about half a century ago, I can hardly now claim to be saved by mysterious powers; though it could be possible that such powers need not be connected to any religious belief, but might instead come from inner fortitude, or some alien source beyond human comprehension. Thus, while I tend not to believe that creeds dreamt up by illiterate peasants, a millennium or two ago, should be my guiding light in this age of scientific enlightenment, I cannot altogether discount the theory that alternative powers could exist to protect the body physical.