



INTRODUCTION to BOOK 3: a new and very different branch

Re-evaluating our actions as we progress through life, is a repetitive function of the human mind. This applies throughout society and encompasses everyone: front-runners who have reached the pinnacle of their chosen field, along with folk at the other extreme, dealing with everyday matters at a local level. Are we happy with the trajectory? Do we need or want to change things to incorporate other elements?

Any re-appraisal conjures with past, present and future. To arrive at a meaningful conclusion, we necessarily think of what we have done and accomplished to get us to that point in time, what we are doing now - which changes from present to past every millisecond - and where we want to be in the future. Again, it can be at very different levels: cooking a meal, providing clean water for a village family, winning Olympic gold, becoming president of a nation. It's unlikely that cows and koalas have the aptitude for such things, but we humans can't resist reflective analysis on a regular basis.

George had adopted Australia in his teens, admittedly with a degree of blinkered gusto; but by the end of his twenties, he had begun to see a country where a fair proportion of white males (all immigrants themselves) got half-pissed before six o'clock closing, whilst loudly deriding the rightful aboriginal owners of the place, for being alcoholics, and then criticising most newcomers to the country because they had the cheek to gatecrash the cosy existence the incumbents already enjoyed. This was paradoxical in the extreme!

But there was another assessment going on within him, which ran parallel to the wider society and focused on his own part within the broader play. He had travelled a somewhat privileged path via private school and college, to arrive at work in the corporate sector. And it was the end point which troubled him: a world in the main peopled by white males; both those in the industry he worked alongside, and the farming fraternity they connected to. In some ways mirroring the Australiana all around, his inner circle was a recurring, scripted drama of racism, sexism, and bigoted elitism. By the age of thirty he was turned off by the whole thing! Lucky country? It was only lucky because such a small percentage of the planet's population existed on such a large tract of land: 20 million on the island continent. This he concluded was immoral and unjust.

George himself throws more light on the subject:

"My own circumstance shows clearly that the reality of experience influences what one thinks and does. Nature slowly becomes engulfed by nurture. The first twenty years or so, were for me predominantly rural - with Victorian overtones - and I allowed myself to be immersed in this comfort zone: to get pulled along by the family gripe that Clement Atlee and the Labour Party destroyed private industry in Britain during the 1940s; or later to give tacit agreement to the 'White Australia Policy', until (succumbing to pressure) it was discarded as colonialist and racist, in the 1960s. Then, in my early twenties and from inside my Australian bubble, I began to see some of the flaws, and to ask some searching questions related for example, to class, to race, and to gender."

But it wasn't all black and white; there were shades of grey in between. George came to know some exceptionally good people who owned large swathes of land, but whose suffering could be immense, when times were made tough by lack of rain, or locust invasion. He recalls the horrors of a mouse plague in wheat growing areas: the road in front of the headlights a sea of a thousand tiny creatures scurrying this way and that; a haystack as if alive, moving with mice. In conversation with a farmer friend, he listened in

horror being told how mice would nibble on the ears and toes of his kids when they were asleep! Many of these land-owning gentry were true friends, so it was with a sense of guilt that he turned away from them, abandoning the good ship of white privilege, for something he considered more fulfilling; driven by a desperate urge to move away from his comfort zone (which by then had become his uncomfortable zone).

George again:

“This all happened during my third and fourth decades, when the political views I aspired to, veered markedly from right to left. In 1967, native Aborigines had been given the right to vote, after surviving almost 200 years as inhabitants of their own country, under British rule and without such privilege. Not long after that, the reforming labor leader, Gough Whitlam, was sacked by Sir John Kerr, a gin-swilling Governor General, while in other parts of the world, the impeachment of Nixon, the overbearing Cold War and the rise of Thatcherism, enabled Rupert Murdoch and his media buddies to flourish. Who of sound mind would not want to move left, in the face of all this abuse of power from the right?”

This negative take on the world at large, which had slowly seeped into his being, was intensified markedly by a return to university studies: the halls of academia re-affirming and underpinning a greater understanding related to aspects of development. Theory was then corroborated by practice, first via a study visit of village India, later through project work across the wider India and neighbouring Bangladesh. George found his new focus exhilarating. He was where he wanted to be; involved in a world of work which benefited others. It was work that he enjoyed doing. In addition, those dictates from his boyhood life had re-surfaced again, as robust pillars: it was hard to avoid maxims like *waste not want not*, when working at ground level in India!

But though he became a *Leftie*, he was a moderate *Leftie*. He knew the value of compromise and understood that most things in life can never be viewed solely from one side of the spectrum; there were nearly always competing opinions to go with any topic or argument one might choose. The two disciplines of environment and agriculture

for example, can be diametrically opposed; but having worked as an agriculture advisor, before moving to environmental education, George was able to view each from both sides of the same coin, well aware that environmentalists or agriculturalists could on occasions be right, while at other times wrong; either side capable of overstepping the mark, stretching truth one way or the other. Over time, he saw that a path between opposing viewpoints and partisan positions was almost always available to be found and developed, providing both sides were up to the task.

He also came to realise that his background without a mother from five years of age, then becoming estranged from family in his teenage years, before travelling on his own to Australia at the age of 16, had all come together to toughen him up. He had survived serious calamities on land, in the air, and at sea, as well as an infamous terrorist attack, but in many ways, the independent nature that came from having to carve out his own path, had given him strength to face the obstacles and adversities thrown on the track.

George expands on this topic:

“I remember quite vividly my 21st birthday - normally a reason to party with family and friends - where I found myself sitting at a dinner table in a remote part of Australia, with people I hardly knew. They were taken aback when I announced I was '21 today'. But by then, events like that had ceased to worry me; the next day was a normal working day. I sometimes feel I can withstand adversity, perhaps a little easier than those with more cushioned backgrounds.”

Of course, George's life is a singular story – not one other, amongst Earth's almost eight billion, can boast the exact same – but in some ways it is also not totally unique. Many years after he had gone through the trauma of realising the details of his heritage were a pack of lies, he was astounded to find Hollywood actor, Jack Nicholson, recounting a similar experience. For about 26 years Jack lived with people whom he believed to be his parents and older sister, then the 'sister', who was 17 years older, died of cancer. Ten years after that, he discovered the people he had grown up with, were actually his

grandparents and his mother! He never knew his father. Later still, with hindsight, Nicholson commented:

"I'd say it was a pretty dramatic event, but it wasn't what I'd call traumatizing. By the time I found out who my mother was, I was pretty well psychologically formed. As a matter of fact, it made quite a few things clearer to me. If anything, I felt grateful."

At 26, George was a bit younger than Jack had been (36) by the time he became aware of his true self, but the basic story is remarkably similar: a cover up by grandparents to protect their daughter, and her child. In essence he agreed with the movie star about being obviously affected at the time, but in the end seeing things more clearly.

There were other noticeable comparisons in that Jack Nicholson lived with his mother's sister, much in the same way that George had grown up with his mother's sisters, who were in reality his aunts. In addition, at the age of 16 years in high school, Jack was voted "class clown" and was in detention every day for the whole school year, not that dissimilar to George's school-based activities at around the same age.

Nicholson also remarked that he was *"very impressed by their ability to keep the secret, if nothing else."* George too was begrudgingly impressed at the ability of his family to maintain a comparable secret for so many years.

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Mentors can be a major influence on direction. Most of us have them to varying degrees, beginning usually with parents. But due perhaps to the fact that in George's case there were no real parents, he can be seen to have attached himself to certain people ... and they to him. Over the years there have been quite a number of true friends, as well as very influential workmates, but only three of the people he was close to, could also be classified in that very special category of mentor; there primarily to advise and add positive direction; to provide a role model. And in so doing, it seemed each of the three was assigned to look after a clear and separate portion of his life.

The phenomenon begins at an early age with a close ten-year relationship to his uncle on the farm in Cornwall. This person he knew as his brother, shepherded him through those formative years, and even when George veered off the track in his teens, his uncle was always there to help steady the ship and provide a positive grounding to counteract the negative influences. This man passed on a set of key values which remained valid and strong, as George transited from one section of his life to another.

Five years after that, Tom, the Australian agronomist, took him on board, teaching him to work and play hard, plus pilot a single-engine *Piper Cherokee*. This was something quite different: a man of the world with a remarkable, and at times unusual, set of values. And while everyone had loved his uncle, the first mentor, Tom was a totally different personality who inspired either love or hate from people he connected to. For George, apart from one or two major arguments, it was a bonding with great affinity which brought out the best in both.

There was then a period between the second and third phases of his life when George had no solid mentor. There were a number who were there for relatively short periods - university lecturers, an Indian professor – all valuable, but no one of long-lasting consequence. That is until the day George met John, in England: a man of great stature and solid principles, and different in many ways to the mentors who had gone before. John was a daunting figure to many. In both appearance and style he resembled the well-known journalist *Christopher Hitchens* in his later years, whom George also greatly admired: greying hair down to his collar, cream coloured jacket, similar polished accent, brilliant oratory skills, unbeatable in debate. And like Christopher, if you wanted to confront John you needed to be extremely sure of your facts ... or face annihilation!

Towards the end of the extended period between Tom and John, where there was no solid mentor in sight, George seemed to falter in both method and ambition. This was compounded by illness in the mid-1990s, and it wasn't until the late 90s when he teamed up with John, that normal forward transmission appeared to resume, heralding a decade of inspiring development work in India and Africa. The end of their close working

relationship came about when John died, and since then there has been no-one. Like Christopher Hitchens on the world stage, it would be an understatement to say that John would be a hard act to follow.

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The period after Tom and before John coincided with a move away from what might be regarded as normal existence in Australia. Travelling the rural back-blocks with a focus on agriculture, first merged with, then changed completely to, mature age studies at university, where there was a strong leaning towards environmental issues, sustainable development, social justice and north-south perspectives.

When his university pursuits went from part-time to full-time, George had to cut the work ties with Tom, his mentor turned role model, with whom he had joined as junior business partner. This was not easy. Their relationship spanned 15 years and had developed into something that approached a father-son bond. After the parting they kept in touch, but things were never ever the same: George felt guilty, while Tom was aggrieved to lose the person he had put full trust in.

But while feeling guilty to have turned his back on people he was close to - particularly Tom – George also felt a new sense of freedom: shackled in his thirties by a predictable destiny, then suddenly with chains released able to tackle new and exciting horizons. The world of Global Education beckoned, which led to work in India and other developing countries. In some ways it wasn't so different to what had gone before: both involved advice and in some ways mentorship, his earlier world focused on farmers, while the latter targeted schoolteachers and their pupils.

This period of change encompassed frequent visits with a new family back to England, his birthplace. Eventually, after about 10 years, the frequent visits turned into a permanent stay, which is when John, George's third mentor, came into view. In many ways it was a total change: new family, new vocation, and new country. Perhaps the most invigorating, purpose-driven period of his life.

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