



## 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 an ashen 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 had 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 at a younger age we approach them without too much of a second thought.

So let me wander back to a few of my own challenges - some of which seemed more surmountable than others - to see how they shape up when viewed from the armchair of space and time. These are encounters, not so much to do with outside forces that suddenly decide to descend, but more concerned with my own capability to meet the everyday circumstance. In fact most of the trials that confront us are like that: made smaller or larger by our inner capabilities.

I should begin by declaring that I am a long way from being an extrovert, though I have over the years, been known to co-habit with people of that ilk. That *talkative lady* from an earlier chapter, who became my travelling companion after I had lived a few years in Australia, was in some ways quite similar to the younger lady, who decades later became my long-term partner in Africa. They both were (and still are) very garrulous souls, up for the challenge of participating in anything and everything that crosses their path. Within all this I seem to have proven the much-vaunted fact that opposites do indeed attract (whether voluntarily or involuntarily).

But I find it hard in my case to know why; I like the idea of flamboyance in others (up to a point) but tend to shy away from anything like the same for myself. In the early days, and underneath all the necessary male bravado, I was a timid soul: a bit of a *wallflower*. I can't remember how many times I sat in the shadows outside dance clubs when I was younger, scared to enter the fray; feeling ill-equipped to participate in the banter and repartee that I knew was required to become one of the crowd; scared to confront the chaotic atmosphere that I knew I might find inside. At times I even sat there dreading the encounter so much that I turned and went away: I travelled home alone.

In the longer term, that extreme degree of fear did dissipate. With age, wisdom eventually comes to the fore. But I did often find that rather than staying within a situation I felt comfortable with, I seemed to lay myself open to more assaults on my bubble of moderately introverted character, from the alien world beyond. Why, I ask myself from the vantage point of semi-retirement, did my life come to revolve around talking to others and presenting to groups, even large crowds of people? My natural instincts lay behind the scenes – writing the text, drawing the graphics – rather than the actor out there at the centre of the stage. I can only assume it was a self-motivated, long-term mission, to overcome my fears ... or perhaps to be truthful, it all happened just by chance, with (as usual for me) far too little planning. Whatever was the cause, at the end of the day it had limited effect, for just like the retiring stage actor, each time the role ended, I would return to being that same, somewhat reclusive self.

Some of the inborn fear was drawn out of me during my early years in Australia. Then, it seemed as though I was destined to sink or swim, and after being thrown in at the deep end, I went through a rapid assimilation period amongst 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 all white, and almost all silver-spooned youths, straight from a legacy of owning tracts of land as big as Cornwall, the English county that I hailed from. I arrived in their midst as that fresh-off-the-boat, freckle-faced *pom*: pale-skinned, with an accent to match.

Out of necessity, I quickly developed an ability to blend in at varying levels, meaning that 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, while at the same time enabling me to disguise my inner lack of confidence. Thus, embroiled in the situation of being surrounded by a posse of rasping, nasal-voiced Aussies, under the hot southern sun, meant that within a year, I too was beginning to look and sound as if I was born and bred on a massive, sun-parched sheep station. A third advantage was spawned by my background, as it quickly became evident that no-one the world over could resist the trend set by the *Mop-Top Four* from my swinging England birthplace: not even a *cow-cocky* from *Tennant's Creek*.

So with this successful absorption of Australiana behind me, I moved on to become – rather remarkably given the circumstances (and my inhibitions) – an advisor to farmers, usually more than twice my age. I became one-seventh of a young, all male team, set up by an American-owned corporate, to do research and counsel farmers across South-Eastern Australia, on the judicious use of farm chemicals (something which I shied away from a decade or so later, and today I abhor!). An intriguing aspect was that my one-seventh was quite different to the remaining sixth sevenths, the other strapping sun-bronzed Aussies all came from an orthodox and legitimized state-run college, whereas I had parachuted in from Mars, my college being regarded by my compatriots as a private, fly-by-night affair. And of course, I felt somewhat outnumbered, perhaps why I

was plucked from the group's midst and whisked off to work in the next-door state, South Australia.

But even at that supposedly more mature stage, those inbuilt inhibitions came sailing through, when Tom, my at times outrageous boss, organized a day-long boat trip for our branch of the company, along with dancing girls and the works. In typical style I feigned sickness and instead spent my day on the streets of Melbourne.

A much more serious need for seamless 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 global 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, with whom we seldom seemed to mix.

The major skill that this position provided – for re-use in an ever-changing career - was 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 together 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 particularly useful when I transferred across to the NGO world of aid and development, which – as I quickly came to know – carries the Olympic flag for its ability to manufacture meetings of all shapes and sizes, from almost nothing. This was well-demonstrated when 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 the urban slums of two major cities, Nairobi and Mombasa. And though at first sight, it all presented as a rather complex and daunting 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, delivered with a degree of aplomb.

One telling factor in all this was a distinct dislike – almost hatred – of being involved in any prize-giving aspects (which was a very mandatory ritual, particularly in Kenya). My staff would often look bemused each time I said: “No, you do it; I need to take the photos,” ... or something similar. It wasn’t that I did not appreciate the people who had won the certificates, just that in my own mind’s eye I always seemed to be looking the wrong way, or saying the wrong words, during that crucial handshake. This was not true. I could do the job as well as most, but even as the boss of the show I still lacked that final degree of confidence.

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During the 1990s I changed careers, discarding the excursion into *global education*, which had sucked up my energies for a decade or so. The new relatively fleeting distraction lasted for five or six years and took me into an adjacent world of teaching English to non-English speakers. It seems half the world has a go at this at some stage, so why not me? Well, the short answer to that is probably: ‘because it’s not a vocation that fits your character; the art of TEFL (as it is known by the legions who try it) is more suited to outgoing, extrovertish types, not bookworms like you.’

I remember one soul-destroying training session where a tall, rather frightening Polish lady marched us around in a circle, as she barked out orders in Polish and brandished an odd variety of photos. Of course, none of us had a clue what she was on about, but some of the quicker ones caught on through the actions and photos. As usual, I hid my light under a bushel and tagged on behind the leaders.

The training followed quite a rigid four-part format which we all had to follow and then regurgitate during test sessions and the final exam. Later, in practice I found that I used very little of this strict format, but I guess overall, the method seeped into my teaching through a sort of osmosis. Anyway, at the end of it all I passed, not with flying colours I have to admit, but at least I did pass. In fact, I think you probably had to murder the

trainer – as I am sure some often thought about doing – in order to fail! But much to my surprise, after the pass grade, I was given a job teaching immigrants, back in another wing of the same training college. Perhaps I wasn't so bad after all.

After some time I grew to like the job, teaching English to people of all ages from so many different countries. I even took on a voluntary role, and on one evening each week taught a small group of newcomers to Australia, from Cambodia. And as I said, I did not really follow the format learnt in training; my methods were a little unorthodox and borrowed from prior experience in India and Bangladesh. but the mostly young Australian citizens-to-be loved it, which I guess at heart, was all that mattered.

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In parallel with learning to teach English, I stumbled on a very personal challenge to my own well-being, which saw me doubling down to find the courage that could cope with an unprecedented 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 with coloured wires attached to fingers and toes, 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 that the swelling, spotted by chance, was caused by a form of *Thyroid Cancer*. I recall the news hitting 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? ... Not possible! There has never been anything seriously wrong with me during the 47 years negotiated so far. Why should anything change now?”*

But like a million or more 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 that *aura of protection* which, I had been told by an Italian- Kenyan friend, I possessed.

*“Yes, I can see it surrounds your body,”* the man had declared, *“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 protected 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 attention!

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 is it,”* I wondered, *“If she needs to keep it at barge pole distance, that I am 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 - after visiting the other side - I had 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 so, until one day when 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 they said.

This came as a blow way below the belt 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 two weeks after the initial ordeal, was a thought that made me tremble with fear. On top of that, I was fully aware that my body could function comfortably with the one remaining thyroid gland (in the same way we can still operate with one kidney, or one ear) but removing the second gland would leave me dependent on a daily intake of chemicals 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!”*

Then of course, *Murphy’s Law* came into play. For the second dose of after-op care my Gaelic sweetheart was off-duty; in her place, I had to endure the close attentions of a balding male nurse. I was not amused.

Reflecting on this traumatic time in my middle years, I can only presume we all have these defining moments at some stage, as we transit from cot to coffin. Whether or not – as was suggested to me some years later - we like to convince ourselves that escape

from premature demolition was enabled by mysterious forces other than medical intervention, or just sheer luck, 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 I guess it is quite possible that such powers need not be connected to any religion, or religious belief, but might instead come from inner fortitude, or some alien source beyond human comprehension. Thus, while I tend *not* to believe that creed dreamt up by the twelve disciples - or any of the other faith-based mythical story - should be my guiding light in this age of scientific enlightenment, I still cannot totally discount the possibility, that alternative powers could exist to protect my body physical and all its inner contents.

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So what have I learn from all this? In response to mentor John's half question, half statement from his deathbed, which seemed in awe of how I did things, I knew only too well, that beneath the disguise, my way of doing things lacked a certain degree of confidence that in truth, it really was worthy of. I have done and achieved some remarkable things in my life to date, but I do wonder what I might have been able to do and achieve if I had shown more confidence in myself, to let go of those inhibitions and become the full person that I was aware of, buried down below.

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