



New lands and fresh lifestyles

Consciously or subconsciously, we all evaluate our progress as we move from branch to branch on our tree of life. This notion encompasses everyone: front-runners who have reached the pinnacle of their chosen field, along with folk at the other extreme, struggling with everyday matters at a local level. Are we happy with the trajectory? Or do we need to change things to incorporate other elements?

Any re-appraisal conjures with past, present and future. We factor in aspects such as what we have accomplished to get 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. These constant assessments of progress related to goals can be at very different levels: cooking a meal, providing clean water for a village, 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 very regular basis.

In terms of re-evaluating progress, George was no different. Having adopted Australia in his teens with a degree of blinkered gusto, by the end of his twenties he saw a country where a fair proportion of white males (all immigrants themselves) got half-pissed before *six o'clock closing*, whilst loudly categorising the rightful aboriginal owners of the place, as lazy alcoholics, and then criticising most newcomers to the country because they had the cheek to gatecrash the cosy existence the incumbents already enjoyed. For George, this was beginning to seem paradoxical in the extreme!

But there was another critique going on within his mind, which ran parallel to the wider society and focused on his own part within the broader play. In his newly adopted land,

he had travelled a somewhat privileged path via private school and college, to arrive at work in the corporate sector, an environment in-the-main peopled by white males, both those he worked alongside, and the farming fraternity they connected to. His workplace mirrored the wider Australiana, a recurring, scripted drama of racism, sexism, and bigoted elitism. By age 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 (stolen) land: 20 million on an island continent twice the size of India!

George himself throws more light on the subject:

“My own history 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, when I was very young, 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', prior to it being discarded as colonialist and racist, in the 1960s. Then, in my twenties and from inside my Australian bubble, I began to see some of the flaws, and to ask some searching questions.”

It wasn't all black and white; there were many 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 perhaps locust invasion. He recalls the horrors of a mouse plague in wheat growing areas: the road in the headlights a sea of tiny dark creatures scurrying this way and that; a haystack as if alive, moving with mice. In conversation with a farmer friend, he listened in horror to bedtime stories of mice nibbling the ears and toes of the man's kids, whilst fast asleep! Many of this land-owning clique were true friends, and he felt a sense of guilt for turning away from them: abandoning the good ship of white privilege!

George again:

“During my third and fourth decades, 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, without such privilege. Not long after that, Sir John Kerr, the Queen’s representative - perhaps oblivious to the fact things had moved on since the days of Empire - sacked the new Labour party leader, Gough Whitlam; 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 burgeoning media empire 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 reinforced by a return to university studies. But the halls of academia provided a new take on it all: showing ways in which challenges could be met and rectified. George then moved to corroborate theory by putting it into practice (a trait for which he became well-known) with first a study visit to village India, and later through project work across the wider India and neighbouring Bangladesh. He found this new focus exhilarating. He was where he wanted to be, doing work he enjoyed: exploring perspectives to underpin equality. And the roots of this work tracked back to dictates from his boyhood life; 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 recognized the values of compromise and consensus, understanding 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. 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 either side 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. 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 teenage years, before travelling alone to Australia at the age of 16, had come together to toughen him up. In many ways, the independent nature that came from having to carve out his own path, gave him strength to face the obstacles and adversities thrown on his 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 difficulties, perhaps a little easier than those with more cushioned backgrounds."

Of course, George's life is a singular story – not one other member of the human species, 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 an astoundingly 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 very comparable: 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 Nicolson also 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 the same type of secret, for so many years.

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The importance of mentorship

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: a shoulder to lean on. This man passed on a set of key values which remained quite valid, as George transitted 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 hold a single-engine *Piper Cherokee* on the straight and level. 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 a period between the second and third phases of his life when George had no solid mentor. Some 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, inability to suffer fools! And like *Hitch*, if you wished 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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For George, the period after Tom and before John, coincided with a move away from what might be regarded as his normal existence in Australia. Travelling the rural back-blocks with a focus on agriculture, changed completely to mature age studies at university, with a strong leaning towards perspectives in life beyond Australia's shores.

When university pursuits went from part-time to full-time, George had to cut work ties with Tom altogether. 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 the same: George felt guilty, while Tom was aggrieved to lose his *prodigal son*.

But while feeling guilty to have turned his back on people he knew - 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. An initial Australian apprenticeship in the *Global Education* field would lead back to Britain and on to work in India and other developing countries. In some ways it wasn't so dissimilar to what had gone before; both involved education, each focusing on different subjects; his earlier world with farmers, the latter targeting 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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