



## It makes you think...



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**W**hy think?  
*Because if you don't, you are at the mercy of those who would prefer to think for you and in letting them do so, you give up your power and independence.*

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### Why think?

Why not?

Can we get someone else to think for us?

Many of us do. We're quite happy to give up thinking for ourselves and leave it to any number of others: our boss, our spouse, the government, the 'smart' people, the media, advertisers, experts, our parents, our children, our teachers, intellectuals, our doctor, the... (fill in the blanks yourself) ...although we may then complain about what they tell us.

What's the use of thinking, anyway? All the important questions have been answered. How can I come up with anything new or important?

What *are* the important questions?

How will we know when we have the right answer to the important questions?

Are some answers more right than others? How would we know?

Questions, questions and more questions. Why ask them? How do we answer them?

Some of the possible answers to this will show themselves as you ask the questions.

So, why think?

I can tell you that to do so can be exciting and invigorating and enlivening. It can be much more fun than gobbling up some of the prepared meals offered by television, radio, cinema and the press; although from time to time these do offer material which invites us to think.

Why think?

Because if you don't, you are at the mercy of those who would prefer to think for you and in letting them do so, you give up your power and independence.

By allowing others to think for you and give you *their* answers to *their* questions, you allow yourself to be controlled. Freedom exists in the ability and willingness to question, and thus think. Thinking involves asking questions, especially "What if...?"

If you allow others to do all your thinking for you or on your behalf, you give up the ability to truly choose, for you are then limited to the options presented by them. If you ask your own questions, seeking your own answers, then your choices are informed by those questions. This may lead to the same result in many cases as if you had stuck to the choices on offer, but it is not the same. There is a qualitative difference between those things which are served up on a platter and those which you attain through your own endeavour. If you solely rely on other people's answers, you often don't know what questions were asked. Information, without the questions that led to the information, is often not very useful.

By asking questions in every instance, you are able to respond to circumstances and, importantly, changing circumstances – you are response-able. If you leave all the thinking up to others, you give up your response-ability.

We all know the aphorism, "The price of freedom is eternal vigilance"<sup>1</sup>. This is usually quoted to support the admonition that if we don't keep an eye on our institutions, we will lose our freedoms. That was probably Jefferson's meaning. This may be true, but freedom requires more than just keeping an eye on them. How will you know if 'they' are doing the right thing, if 'they' are serving *you* or their own needs? Only by asking questions – asking questions of them and asking questions within yourself.

Every day we are fed rubbish by the bucket-load, in the form of 'spin' and misinformation. It is very much like a magician's trick: the magician distracts the audience's attention so that s/he may do something else unnoticed. Much of what is fed to us through the media is aimed at distraction. The only way to deal with this constructively and responsibly is to ask questions, such as:

"Does this make sense?"

"What is it based on?"

"If it doesn't make sense, why not?"

"What is the magician trying to distract me from?"

Much of what we are fed in the media masquerades as answers to important questions. It is a dangerous masquerade, as the questions are seldom useful ones and the answers are often not even answers to the questions being asked – they are information put out to elicit the responses sought by those who want something from you. They may be after your money, your support, your loyalty, your custom. Too often, what is put out as news, isn't – it is nothing other than PR, regurgitated uncritically.

The questions and 'answers' are formulated in such a way that you are lulled into a sense of security and no longer feel the need to think for yourself. How often have you witnessed an interview with a public figure where that person says what they want to say, no matter what the questions are? It is not an interview, but a soliloquy. There is no engagement but an attempt to stifle the thinking of others.

There are some very worrying indications that most people have given up thinking. Andy Bichlbaum, Mike Bonanno et al., who make up 'the Yes Men'<sup>2</sup>, have given addresses to august bodies, including the WTO. In their presentations they have made outrageous

suggestions and claims, and those in the audience have responded with nodding heads and even acclaim. No-one in the audience was thinking, no-one was asking questions.

We should all be very concerned about this, because these are the people (the audience at the WTO gathering for instance, not 'the Yes Men') who make important decisions on our behalf. These are decisions which lead to actions which shape societies, countries and (often) the whole global community. These are the people whose decisions should be questioned more carefully for the very reason that they have such an impact. Many of their decisions lead to results which are very difficult to reverse or undo when it finally appears that they are not the results we want. If the right questions had been asked at the outset, the results may have been very different.

Why think?

We are born to think, to question. Anyone who has ever spent some time with a young child will have been fascinated (and eventually perhaps exasperated) by this little person's ability to ask "Why?" in a seemingly endless stream. Young people also ask "When?" and "What?" and "How?" Their thirst for answers seems inexhaustible. And it may even appear that they are more interested in the process of asking questions than the answers they receive. Most young people learn that the same question will elicit different answers depending on who they ask, how they ask, when they ask. In other words, answers can depend on circumstances.

Babies are born knowing nothing. They need to learn about the world and their relation to it. One way of doing this is asking questions, when they have language. Changes in circumstances will prompt more questions as will a growing understanding and appreciation of the world.

Most children have an innate wisdom, uncluttered by facts. They explore through all their senses and through asking questions of those around them. Somewhere in their experience of school, most children seem to replace questing with knowing and, in the process, move from a state of excitement to one of safety. They give up the fun of the journey for the safety of the destination – a destination usually decided for them by someone else.

At some point, whether because parents become exasperated or teachers need to get on with teaching facts, the questioners are made to understand that it is not right to keep asking questions. They are taught that the world is a certain way and that this is to be accepted.

The word 'education' comes from a Latin root that means 'to draw out'. Educating people should be about drawing out of them ideas and approaches to the world and helping them make sense of these in relation to people, things and events around them. Education should also be about drawing out questions and helping the enquirer understand the relevance of the

questions to circumstances and the relevance and usefulness of any answers. Education should not be about stuffing people's minds full of facts and information which stifles their ability, and willingness, to think.

It needs to be made clear to young people that there is great power in asking questions and that there is wisdom to be found in dealing with the answers in a way that furthers that person's wellbeing, happiness and fulfilment. The shame needs to be taken out of not knowing – what most people don't know is far greater than what they do know, but they are either unaware of this or won't admit to it. Our schools make currency of facts and knowledge, whereas the true currency should be the ability to ask useful and powerful questions; and not as a competition to see who can ask the most questions that others cannot answer.

One useful question for a student to ask a teacher is, "Why are we learning *this* and not something else?" What can we learn about the process of education by looking at the 'knowledge' which is judged to be important and that which is discarded?

There is too much which could be taught in school as facts. How do those who set the curriculum choose what to teach? The pool of facts is growing exponentially; however, the pool of useful questions is much more manageable.

I learned to use a slide rule and logarithm tables (and mental arithmetic) at school because we had no electronic calculators. I don't believe it would be useful today to teach the use of slide rules and log tables, because the pocket calculator has made these unnecessary; but mental arithmetic *is* a useful skill, in order to know whether the calculator's answer is within the realm of possibility. And learning to do mental gymnastics teaches us to use our minds.

Thinking is essential to staying mentally healthy, as physical exercise is essential to physical health. Engaging in activities which exercise the mind helps protect us against depression<sup>4</sup> and, in the long term, may help prevent some of the scourges of old age: Alzheimer's disease<sup>5</sup>, Parkinson's disease, dementia<sup>6</sup>, memory loss<sup>7</sup>, etc.

Most of us would consider it fortunate that there are people who innovate, who invent things. Would this be possible if the would-be inventor didn't think? Inventing requires the ability to think beyond what is in front of you. It requires imagination. While most of us will not be inventors on a large scale, we do over a lifetime innovate; we find solutions to common problems and find ways of fixing things around the house, without calling in a tradesperson. Some people become inventive out of economic necessity and gain skills and confidence in the process.

We do so by asking questions – questions such as: "How can I fix this?"; "Can this work better?"; "Can I save money by...?". It is the thinking 'outside the box' which leads to innovation, development, progress.

An example of our tendency to think within set or imagined boundaries is the following puzzle.



The task is to connect all the dots by drawing four straight lines without lifting your pen, and passing through each dot only once. A possible solution is shown at the end of this article.

If you are unable to find a solution on your own, what is stopping you? What assumptions are you making? What questions do you ask and what questions do you fail to ask?

A clothes hoist is an invention on a large scale – a wire coat hanger doing service as an aerial on a car is one on a smaller scale. Seeing a more efficient design for a wave-driven electricity generator in a coastal blow-hole, is an insight leading to a solution with major impact. Designing a ceiling exhaust fan which works on the flow of hot water going to the shower head, instead of on electricity, is an application of thinking which will have less of an impact on the world. However, all of these are the result of thinking.

Why think?

G B Shaw wrote: "Some people see the world as it is and ask 'why'; I see things that aren't and ask 'why not?'" Much of my success in my short career as a solicitor in the early 1970s was due to my asking the question, 'Why not?' I irritated many of my colleagues with this and made more than the usual number of enemies. But I was able to make a difference. I often refused to accept the contemporary wisdom about a legal approach and would go hunting for alternatives. This would usually result in a better outcome for my client and greater satisfaction for me. What amazed me, however, was that my colleagues, who could have benefited from my bout of thinking and likewise done things differently, with likewise better results, mostly went back to what they were used to and complained that it was unfair that I should be doing so well.

Occasionally I discovered that the interpretation of the law which was in vogue about a particular point, was in fact wrong – it was not supported by the written law. But this again often resulted in animosity from colleagues, who told me I had no right to

challenge the way 'it' had been done for years. They seemed frightened of anything different. Where did their fear come from?

Another example is a farmer on the Murrumbidgee River flood plain. He awoke one morning with a crazy idea. He hired a small plane and a pilot, and spread sacks of pumpkin seeds into the flood waters below. The neighbours were full of derision. The farmer had the last laugh, when he harvested many tonnes of pumpkins some months after the flood waters had receded.

Why think?

Thinking allows us to make connections where there may appear to be none. Facts are often accepted at face value, separately.

An example of a valuable area where thinking could reap important results is the discovery that proteins emit microwaves<sup>3</sup>. Why do they do this? Is it deliberate or a by-product of some process? Are proteins sensitive to microwave transmissions? If so, what effect does this have on their function or their health? Could this be a mechanism for good or bad effects of mobile phones on our health?

Such questions could lead to a raft of possible answers, the truth or relevance of which can then be investigated. The area of mobile phones and the possible effects of their use on our health, is one where concerns are often greeted with easy, pat answers. These answers, unfortunately, usually come from those with vested interests in the industry. However, there are also many scientists who fail to ask such questions as those I asked above. Why? Where does this failure come from? I will explore this further at another time.

A good example of people failing to ask questions is illustrated by the following. It was noticed recently that workers on upper floors of a university building had a higher than normal rate of certain cancers. There are mobile telephone transmission towers on the roof of the building and the conclusion was quickly drawn that these were the cause. A side issue of interest here is that the print and electronic media picked this story up immediately and also that the conclusion about the towers indicates a shift in popular thinking because of concerted campaigns over some time.

An expert in the investigation of (and thinking about) the effects of electromagnetic frequencies (EMFs) on health, investigated by doing some sensitive measuring of EMFs in and around the university building. He concluded that there was insufficient energy coming into the building from the transmission towers to have any effect. However, the top two floors of the building were packed with electrical equipment which was putting out a lot of EMFs. Whether this could be the cause of the high incidence of cancers in the workers is not known. But this story illustrates a tendency to look for quick answers to badly formulated or even unasked questions. Most people fail to think.

There are many examples of people not

thinking or not thinking well. The annual "Darwin Awards"<sup>8</sup> are given for people who have removed themselves from the gene pool through engaging in an activity that kills them or otherwise removes their ability to procreate. Not thinking things through can have disastrous consequences.

Although not disastrous, there are other examples of not thinking through to a point where action could be taken to improve our lot. There have been a number of instances of doctors going on strike for a protracted period in a number of countries. One example is a strike in Israel, as a result of which the *British Medical Journal* reported that it may have been good for the health of the population<sup>9</sup>. Similar stories exist in relation to doctors' strikes in Canada, the USA, Colombia and other countries. The death rate appears to have dropped during the strike and to have risen again when the doctors went back to work.

There seems to have been some research done which could point to reasons for the drop in deaths. Also, there have been articles in major medical journals pointing out the large number of people in certain countries who die as a result of medical intervention in hospitals; in one study in the USA, deaths from negative effects of prescription drugs amounted to over four deaths per ten thousand of the population in one year<sup>10</sup>. Per head of population, the figures are similar in Australia and the UK.

Is anyone thinking beyond these raw figures? Is anyone wondering why this is happening? Does anyone ask why we accept these deaths? Is anyone thinking about this information – really thinking?

We can immediately see that this death rate is far greater than the death rate associated with the use of motor vehicles. Governments and communities are doing a lot of work to reduce the latter, but I am not aware of much being done to reduce the former. What does it take to have people say 'enough!'

With the doctors' strikes, what caused the drop in the death rate? There have been a number of suggestions. An obvious suggestion is that with doctors on strike, there were no deaths due to iatrogenic (doctor-caused) reasons. Another very interesting suggestion (in relation to a doctors' strike in California) was that people who were ill or old could not die if there were no doctors around.

What I have found most interesting is that, while suggestions such as those were made, no-one seems to have asked the questions: "What does this teach us?"; and "Can we learn something from this that will allow people to live healthier, longer lives?"

There is so much going on in the world that presents such rich opportunities to ask questions. There is a widespread failure to make use of these opportunities.

There is also a worrying drop in the amount of pure research being done. Pure research is about asking questions such as "What will happen if I do...?", and then repeating such

questions over and over as the researcher follows an unknown path. Increasingly, research is done with a set of preconceptions and to obtain a particular, defined result. We seem to have forgotten that so much of what has been discovered in the past was done so by people who observed something and asked "Why?" or "Why not?". One example is the discovery of penicillin; another is the discovery that a bacterium can be the cause of stomach ulcers. Why think?

I indicated earlier in this article, thinking and asking questions allows you to respond to what is going on around you in a way that could make a difference. If you respond to situations without thinking, you do so through your emotions and your prejudices. While emotional responses are valid, they are not productive on their own and will generally not bring about useful action. It is the people who think, and especially those who think outside what is expected, who foment change. For individuals, societies, institutions and businesses to survive and thrive, they need to embrace change, and thinking makes this possible.

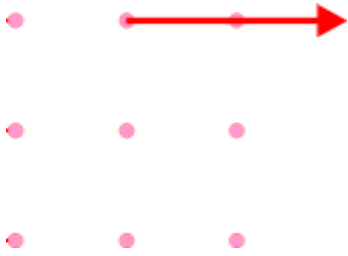
Thinking for yourself allows you to be a more active participant in society. It allows you to live creatively and to teach your children a way of surviving the sometimes stultifying environment of school. Thinking allows you to make more sense of what goes on around you, locally and in the wider world. It helps you make better choices and should lead you to enjoy a more fulfilling life.

*Possible solution to the dot puzzle on page 4.*

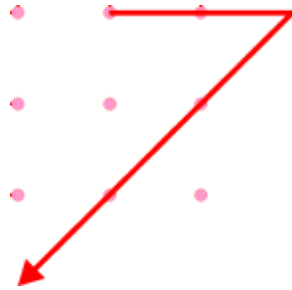
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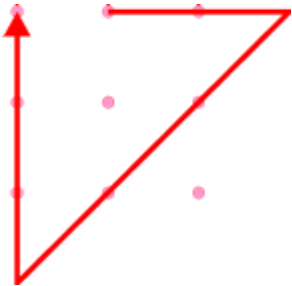
**Solution to Puzzle cont'd from  
page 3**



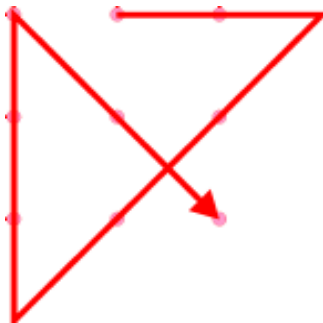
**Step 1.**



**Step 2.**



**Step 3.**



**Step 4.**

