



# **The Strengths in Us All**

**Keynote address for  
the Australian Council for Adult Literacy  
Conference**

***From Strength to Strength***

**Fremantle,**

**Western Australia,**

**1<sup>st</sup> - 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2009**

## **Acknowledgements**

I begin by acknowledging the Indigenous people who walked and worked upon this land  
– and told their tales – for generations before our arrival.  
I express my respect to their Elders, past and present.

I'd also like to acknowledge my colleagues and co-researchers over several projects, in particular  
Dr Crina Virgona who is passionate about strength-based practice.  
Her work has informed my thinking, research and practice.

I'd also like to acknowledge the many adult learners I've worked with over the years,  
in a wide range of contexts, from whom I've learned so much about literacy and adult learning.



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NOTE: A version of this paper was presented as an illustrated lecture at the 2009 ACAL Conference in Freemantle. The images which appear in this version of the paper are (more or less) the pictures used as the basis for the conference presentation.

## Introduction

Some months ago now the conference organisers asked me to supply an abstract, a summary of what I was going to say today. A good idea. “Post it on the web, we will”, they said. A good idea. So I sat down and wrote what turned out to be an abstract in a poem.

I wrote: “*the writer doesn’t know, until it’s written*”. I think that’s true, at least it’s true some of the time. Crafting a paper for this presentation today has been a journey of discovery – and a process of working out what it is I need to say and how I’m going to say it.

We get so used to the idea that we write to show others what we know, that we tend to forget that writing can be an important learning process - a way to *work out* what we know. And when we begin such writing we do not know where it will lead us – sometimes that which is most important, and most useful, is not apparent at the beginning. So,

*Perhaps it would be better not to be a writer, but if you must, then write. If all feels hopeless, if that famous ‘inspiration’ will not come, write. If you are a genius, you’ll make your own rules, but if not – and the odds are clearly against it – go to your desk, no matter what your mood, face the very challenge of the paper – write. J.B. Priestley*



So I have been involved in a process of discovery; trying to work out what to say – trying to find the story I wanted to tell. Ideally, what I’d like to do is what Rolf de Heer does in his wonderful film *10 Canoes*. He plays with the idea of story telling and wraps one story inside another. At one point the narrator, David Gulpillil, tells us that his tale has grown into a full story, like a big old tree, with many branches.

I love the idea that a big story always has other stories inside it - there are stories within stories; and more stories off to the side; there are versions which don’t often get told – there are ‘branches’ not explored.

## Bookshelves & Biographies

I think the story of strength-based practice is still largely unexplored, substantially untold. We are still much more familiar with deficit-based approaches. I think we’re better at identifying deficits, gaps, holes and problems than we are at identifying strengths.

Most of those present at this conference will be aware of the Adult Literacy and Life Skills survey results. Here is proof of our ability to identify our collective weaknesses. The survey has generated

### The Strengths in Us All

[First attempt - synopsis for ACAL,  
Freemantle, October 2009]

Searching for a synopsis, aching for an abstract,  
The problem is,  
The writer doesn’t know, til it’s written.  
The speaker doesn’t know, til it’s spoken.  
The researcher doesn’t know, til it’s found.  
I’m sure I’ve got something to say,  
Something worthwhile  
I’m sure.  
I’m dead sure of it.  
I’m just not sure *exactly* what it is  
Yet  
It’s about identity, personal and professional.  
*Who do you want me to be today?*  
It’s about why (still) literacy matters  
And numeracy too.  
It’s about bookshelves and biographies  
It’s about stories of strength and inspiration.  
Yes, it’s about strengths,  
Finding our strengths,  
Re-cognition of our strengths,  
Owning our strengths,  
*Working from Strengths.*  
It’s about the research, and  
It’s about *the strengths in us all.*

© P.J. Waterhouse.  
28<sup>th</sup> May 2009

some alarming statistics. But leaving aside the deficits identified in the ALLS survey for now; what do I mean by strengths? And how might we tell a story about strength-based practice rather than deficit-based practice? ... And where does this story begin?

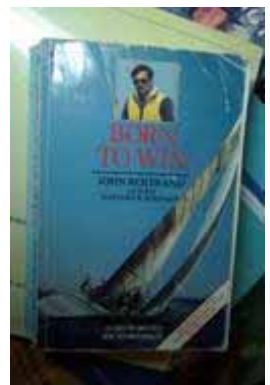
My abstract-in-a-poem suggested some clues,

“It’s about bookshelves and biographies  
It’s about stories of strength and inspiration”.



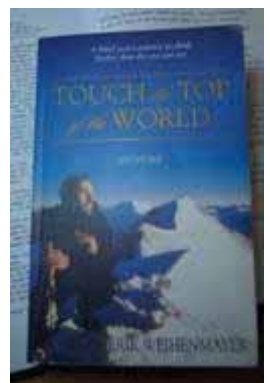
So I’ve decided that my bookshelves and biographies are as good a place as any to start. I wonder whether other people are as fascinated as I am with what’s on other people’s bookshelves? To me, browsing someone else’s bookshelf is like being given a window into their life. So what biographies might we find? What stories of strength and inspiration do we have to draw upon?

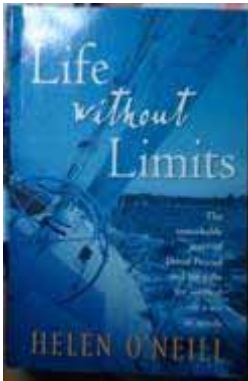
There are so many it’s hard to know where to start. When I wrote for ACAL a few months back I touched upon John Bertrand’s (1986) story in *Born To Win*. This is one of my inspirational texts. In the book Bertrand describes how he used the power of positive imagination to take his Australian crew to a place and a level of performance which was quite unprecedented. He discusses how he learned to recognise and build upon the particular strengths of individual members of his crew. So that biography could be one of the starting points for this story.



Or perhaps we could talk about how Erik Weihenmayer became a serious mountain climber and successfully scaled some of the world highest summits to *Touch the Top of the World*. Nothing exceptional perhaps, except for the fact that Eric is blind. Weihenmayer’s story – which he says shouldn’t be inspirational, actually is – and in places it’s amusing as well. He talks about trekking at high altitude with one of his climbing partners – and they changed places so that the rangers observing them would think his partner was the blind climber.

*As we arrived [says Weihenmayer] I was walking in front of Hans, my feet braced for any random terrain ... Hans stumbled along behind me, butt out, head bobbed forward, swinging the hiking poles wildly in front of him. ... We were both laughing as we thought of the rangers watching in awkward silence the two gringos, the guide almost as clumsy as the blind man he was supposed to be leading. (Weihenmayer, 2001:272-3)*





Or perhaps, closer to our world, we might talk about David Pescud, (O'Neill 2003) another Australian sailor who runs Sailors with disAbilities. David eloquently describes his early school experiences as a living hell. In primary school he was repeatedly caned for 'refusing' to read and spell correctly. By 16 he was suicidal. Then at 17 he was diagnosed with profound dyslexia.

Yet Pescud went on to become a successful business person and by 45 had earned enough to retire and pursue his dream of sailing full-time. He then went onto establish Sailors with disAbilities. He has a passionate belief that *disability is a state of mind*.

In the infamous 1998 Sydney to Hobart race he skippered a crew which included an amputee, a blind man and a 12 year old dyslexic boy. The cyclone in the Southern Ocean that ripped apart the fleet that year sank five boats; and six sailors lost their lives. Only 43 of the 115 yachts who commenced the race managed to finish. Pescud and his crew not only survived, they won their category.

These are some of the texts of my life. I find these stories enriching. In various ways these individuals have found ways to identify and harness their strengths. Their stories are beginning points for me, sources of inspiration ... and there are many others ...

Around about 1989 (it seems a ridiculously long time ago now) I set off on what turned out to be a ten year journey to wards the attainment of a PhD. Through my research I wanted to reflect upon the many texts which had shaped me as a reader, a writer, a learner and a teacher. I started off with a form of timeline in which I tracked texts which were significant for me and I thought about the social, historical and cultural contexts which generated those texts - and my engagement with them. This exploration of text and context; what Freire (1983) called "reading the word and reading the world"; generated a series of collages which I used as preludes to the case studies in the thesis.



Here's part of one of those collages – this one depicting the early sixties, my primary school years ... And here's an excerpt from the thesis relating to that time (Waterhouse 1999).

## Recollections: Primary School

My first school was the local, government funded, State Primary School. It was ordinary enough and since we walked to school (as it seemed everyone did in those days) it was close enough to home to commend it. My recollections of primary school classes in the 1960s are vague. In 1994 during a writing workshop facilitated by a colleague, I re-discovered some primary school memories.

## Average Student: Greensborough P.S. No.2062

Fragmented images through the mists of time ... [here slightly abridged for the sake of time]

Rattling crates of little milk bottles and laughing faces with white moustaches.  
Match sticks jammed in the water siphons so they squirt you in the eye.  
Football and gravel rash in the school yard.  
Mr. Swollen Red Face, a spluttering volcano, fuming fit to burst.  
Ink wells, blue stained fingers  
and long plastic pens with steel nibs.  
Walking in all weathers, bulky coats, hats with ear muffs;  
chilblains and red noses, scarves and gloves,  
puddles that crackled when you walked on them.  
Battered wood chip heater blazing in the classroom  
with Kevin's vinyl glove melted on top.  
Mr. Shiny Shoes who wore smart ties under V necked woollen sweaters,  
...  
Mrs Farm-in-the-Country,  
who loved us, took us there,  
showed us haystacks and horses,  
gum trees and frogs in the grass.

Lessons are lost in the mist,  
but I know I learned from books  
at home  
my tiny steel bookstand  
nurtured Birthday Books:  
*The Wishing Chair,*  
*Wind in the Willows,*  
*Marvels & Mysteries of Our Animal World,*  
*Our Earth & Its Wonders,*  
How and Why Books,  
*Birds, Insects, Machines, Dogs*

...  
Biggles and *Boys Own Annual 1963,*  
Islands of Treasure and Coral  
*The Gorilla Hunters* and *The Young Fur Traders*  
*The Faraway Tree* and *The Enchanted Wood*  
(and Woods are still enchanted for me)...

And there was Mrs Intensity and Passion  
interrogating me  
alone  
in a small room.  
Apparently I wasn't doing as well  
as she thought I ought.  
*Do you think you are a stupid boy?*  
*No.*  
*Do you think you are a silly boy?*  
*No.*  
*Do you think you're dumb?*  
*No.*  
*Do you think you're slow?*  
*No.*  
*Do you think you're incapable?*  
*No.*  
*Do you think you're retarded?*  
*No.*

It went on and on.  
She grew bigger, more intense,  
her puffy powdered cheeks becoming blotchy  
*Do you think you're average?*  
She was almost screaming at me.  
*Do you think you're average?*  
*Yeah, I guess*  
She was disintegrating.  
*You are not average ...*  
*You will never be average!*  
*NEVER, NEVER, NEVER EVER say*  
*you are average.*  
She is looking down now,  
I think she is crying.  
*Never say you are average.*  
*You are special.*  
*You are a very special boy.*  
and so I said OK to please her ...  
Never told anyone ...

Many years later  
the man began to know  
the boy she knew.

When geographers trace the origin of a stream they finish up with not one, but multiple sources; dozens of tiny rivulets trickling down mountain sides. This is one of the tributaries of my educational philosophy - a bewildering encounter with a teacher who cared passionately about her students. (Waterhouse 1999:90 & 97-99)

As I reconsider this piece now I can see that it is also perhaps the beginning of a story about strength-based practice. This teacher could (apparently) see, in me, qualities I did not realise I possessed.

## **Freedrafting & Fairy God-Writers**

Let me here make a bit of a leap, as I do in the thesis, from one time to another. It's the early 1980's and I have discovered the power of free-intuitive writing – what I call 'freedrafting'. Simply writing, whatever comes to mind, without forethought, allowing whatever words come to fall onto the paper, not worrying [at this point in the writing process] about spelling or punctuation or grammar or sentence structure. If you can't think of what to write, write 'I can't think of what to write', over and again if necessary.

Here's another excerpt from the thesis (Waterhouse 1999:123-124) – which captures a freedrafting I retained in my journal from years earlier.

Freedrafting - freedrafting - freedrafting - what to write about!? ... I could write about having nothing to write about - Ridiculous, plenty to write about!  
Yes but who'd be interested?  
*I would.*  
Who are you?  
*Don't you know?*  
No. Should I?  
*I should think so.*  
Well I don't so tell me.  
*I'm your Fairy God Writer.*  
A Fairy God Writer! I didn't know I had one.  
*A lot of people don't - but really there's thousands - millions of us around.*  
*I'm related to your Fairy Godmother and Father.*

Where do you live?  
*What a stupid question. I live in you of course.*  
 In me?  
*Yes, in your heart and mind, your soul - I inhabit your brain and your imagination. I often bring the two of them together - in fact we're great buddies Imagination and I, ...*  
 What do you do? ...  
*Actually I stimulate and nurture your writing. That's why I'm called a Fairy God Writer - Anything that seems like absolute garbage I'm prepared to listen to so long as it's going down in writing. I encourage writing, I'm quite open minded, you don't need to be shy writing for me. You should see some of the things I've seen ...*  
 Does everyone have a Fairy God Writer?  
*I should think so - every God Writer I know has a person.*  
 Hmm interesting. Can I contact you any time?  
*Sure, all you need is a pen, pencil, texta, crayon, typewriter, whatever you like - I'll answer to anything ... I'm on call 24 hours a day.*  
 ... I've got to go now, my class may be sick of writing by now.  
*No - leave them, let them find their own Fairy God Writer.*  
 Well that's what I'm trying to do - but perhaps I can help them to discover where to look.  
*Fair enough - but don't ignore me too long - I shrivel up in the dark you know.*  
 Sorry, I'll try to remember that and open the closet door more often.  
*You do that, I like the sunlight that words provide.*  
 OK look, I gotta go.

Freedrafting 29 July 1983

Fairy God-Writer was androgynous, strong and authoritative, yet wonderfully empathetic. Fairy God-Writer synthesized and embodied the best of all my teachers. S/he was all of the teachers and writers I had ever read, all rolled into one. Fairy God-Writer was whimsical and non-threatening yet s/he knew everything that I had ever read, or had been taught, or had learned. S/he remembered things I had forgotten. S/he couldn't be easily dismissed. The Fairy God Writer enabled a kind of internal dialogue or what Donald Graves (see Walshe (ed.) 1982) and Murray (1968) might call a conference. By engaging this character I could conference with myself, extending my writing and my learning<sup>1</sup>.

I introduced Fairy God-Writer to students I was working with and I engaged the God-Writer character in several workshops and seminars – including the 1984 ACAL Conference in Melbourne.

Several years later I was involved in a writing workshop with a group of colleagues and students where we discussed the power of our *Internal Critics*. I'm sure we all know the internal 'voice' which tells us that what we're doing is crap. The voice that tells us, *before we've even finished a sentence*, that what we're writing is pointless drivel and that we shouldn't waste our own, or anyone else's time with it! In the workshop I talked about how the Fairy God-Writer has been important for me; because the fairy God-Writer has the capacity to deal with the Internal Critic.



<sup>1</sup> Dialogue with self is one of the strategies which Rainer (1980) highlights as one of the seven special techniques of diarists.



One of our workshop participants was a brilliant young cartoonist named Simon Cleary. I am forever grateful to him for these drawings which show his Fairy-God-Writer dealing with the Internal critic.

The first drawing (left) I particularly love for it's graphic power!



The second picture (right) however is probably a truer representation of the Fairy God-Writer's role. We all need our Internal Critics, the problem is sometimes they're completely out of control – and their timing is appalling! It seems we need our Fairy God-Writers, or some form of equivalent, to wrestle the Internal Critic under control.

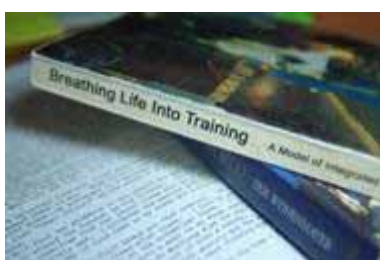
So, for me, the Fairy God-Writer is another source of strength-based practice.

### **Action-research: Breathing Life into Training**

If I jump now to another section of the bookshelf – and another time ... In the early 1990's I was involved with a group of colleagues in work in the automotive manufacturing industry. We began with a deficit approach. We conducted research in the industry – with the Victorian Automotive Industry Training Board and all of the major manufacturers involved at that time.

We were working with a very diverse, multi-cultural, multi-lingual workforce which had, up to that time, very limited formal training. We identified 67 languages other than English being spoken; over 71% of respondents were from Non-English Speaking Backgrounds, approximately one third of respondents spoke English in the home. Of the 430 interviewees nearly a quarter had never attended any English language classes either before coming to, or in Australia. Of those who had attended English language classes over one third scored less than level two on the ASLPR (Australian Second Language Proficiency Rating) scale being used for English language and literacy assessments at the time (Sefton & O'Hara, 1992).

At this time Certificate II level accredited training was being introduced for shopfloor production workers in the vehicle manufacturing industry. Furthermore the newly introduced training was being aligned with career pathways and workers' wages. We could foresee some difficulties. We suggested that if the proposed (Certificate II) vocational training for these existing workers was based on traditional, didactic, teacher-directed training methods with a heavy reliance on English language texts and the printed word; then many workers would be disenfranchised and disadvantaged. On the other hand, we argued that there might be more productive approaches to explore.



On the bookshelf here I have a research report; *Breathing Life into Training: A model of integrated training* (Sefton, Waterhouse & Deakin 1994). This report was one of several generated by a substantial project, funded through the Workplace English Language and Literacy (WELL)

program, in the automotive manufacturing industry. The report documented a series of action-research studies we conducted with the stakeholders in several different auto plants. Through these projects we demonstrated how it was possible to work with the strengths of the existing workers rather than focus upon their perceived deficits.

Their multi-lingual and inter-language skills were often stronger than their English skills (nearly 10% of the workforce spoke four or more languages). So we embraced languages other than English in the classroom. We had people taking notes in their own first languages, we had peer-translators working in pairs and small groups. We also recognised that their spoken skills (in English) were often stronger than their reading and writing skills in English. So we worked with their strengths, minimising the reading and writing to what was absolutely necessary and encouraging the development of spoken language skills and knowledge sharing, including public speaking. We also recognised that their practical, ‘hands-on’ skills were strengths so as much as possible we took the training onto the shopfloor for practical demonstrations and ‘try-outs’. We adopted action-learning principles which played to the learners strengths and interests.

The meta-story of this report was that fresh approaches were needed to address the learning and development needs we identified in the automotive manufacturing sector. The industry was populated with clever creative people who were very capable of responding to and managing change. Many of them had dealt successfully with profound change in their lives as post-war migrants and refugees. However they were struggling within systems, including training systems, which made them appear less clever, competent and capable than they actually were.

We engaged with these people, and with the systems – we explored alternative approaches based on action-learning and critical adult education pedagogy. We worked with the literacy and the language of the workplaces and we became sensitised to the *Ways With Words* (Heath, 1986) adopted by the various industry stakeholders involved.



Of course we could have asked these adult learners to do this interpretive work for themselves; that would have made things easier for us as teachers. But we were mindful of what Professor Brian Cambourne, one of this country’s great educators, tongue in cheek called *Cambourne’s Law*; namely that:

*“Whatever makes the teaching easy for the teacher  
will probably make the learning more difficult for the learner ... and the inverse ...  
Whatever makes the learning easy for the learner  
will probably make the teaching more difficult for the teacher”.*  
Professor Brian Cambourne

So if we are in the business of *facilitating learning* – as distinct from simply ‘teaching’ we have real work to do. Ironically, by taking ‘pressure’ off the English language, literacy and numeracy skills we designed a program which enabled auto workers to participate effectively in a mainstream VET program leading to a nationally recognised Certificate. We were able to demonstrate how they could *improve* their English language skills through meaningful engagement in projects which really mattered to them.

This was another example of strength-based practice – although we didn't use that terminology at the time. When we found that there were substantial numbers of people who were likely to be disadvantaged by the prevailing approaches – we attempted to change the paradigm.

Deficit approaches try to make people fit the system – and as a consequence they sometimes make people look stupid. What the action-research demonstrated was that the system could be changed – and that changing the system could bring benefits for all.

I'm reminded here of George Bernard Shaw's maxim:

*“Reasonable people adapt themselves to the world.  
Unreasonable people attempt to adapt the world to themselves.  
All progress therefore depends upon unreasonable people.”  
George Bernard Shaw*

By this analysis I guess I'm forced to confess I am an unreasonable man.

## **Individuality & Contradicting the Stereotype**

What else is on the bookshelf? What other stories of strength and inspiration? A couple of years ago Crina Virgona and I conducted a study in which we were privileged to hear the life stories of individuals who, like David Pescud mentioned earlier, have built *successful lives* for themselves *despite significant and continuing frustrations with English literacy*.

We argued in this report that these individuals were 'positively deviant' and that they were "Contradicting the Stereotype" of individuals with literacy difficulties. The research showed that Success IS possible – despite 'illiteracy'.



There is not sufficient time here today to explore these case studies - but they are available on a CD-ROM as a series of digital stories. The stories use the voices of the individuals who contributed to the study. I commend them to you and the CD\_ROM is readily available, included with every hard copy of the report available from NCVER. It's not very expensive and you can order it on-line at: <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1590.html>

Given that they had not mastered 'literacy' - we were interested in the strategies that these individuals used to attain their success. They included:

- ❖ the use of *networks and relationships*;
- ❖ the use of *new technologies*;
- ❖ personal *resilience* was a key factor in the face of multiple knock-backs and put-downs;
- ❖ however a key theme to emerge was the way *individuals learned to identify and leverage their own particular strengths*.

The 'contradictions' study lead us deeper into an exploration of strength-based practice. At this point in my story-tree we have three branches forking off – each worthy of exploration in it's own right – and we don't have enough time to discuss any of them thoroughly.

## Resilience

The first branch going off here is about resilience. If we were going to follow this branch I would point to other books on the shelf and prime among them would be Anne Deveson's (2003) beautiful, moving and enriching book, simply titled *Resilience*.

The research literature talks about resilience as a personal, psychological quality *and* as a capacity built through relationships, networking, social and community engagements. Deveson's extraordinary series of portraits gives us an intimate insight into these processes. I cannot recommend it too highly.

Interestingly, David Pescud, says of himself, in the opening paragraph of his autobiography, *Life Without Limits*;

*All I knew was that no one was going to stop me. I've been like that pretty much ever since. Stubborn, pig-headed, crystal clear about where I'm going and why. And God help anybody who gets in my way.*  
(O'Neill 2003:1)

So it appears that, at least in some respects, Pescud has firm control – and perhaps, despite (or maybe because of) his difficulties, he has had this psychological strength from a very early age.

Erik Weihenmayer the mountaineer on the other hand, talks about the importance of his mother, a fiercely protective lioness; and his father, who was “like a broom sweeping me out into the world”(2001:21). He highlights the importance of his father reading to him. He recalls,

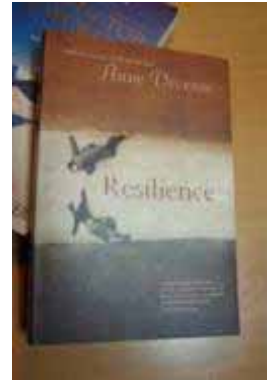
*Some fathers read aloud to their sons from fairy tales or nursery rhymes, but my dad would sit me on his knee and read me his favourite poem.*

## Don't Quit

*When things go wrong as they sometimes will,  
When the road you're trudging seems all uphill,  
When the funds are low and the debts are high,  
And you want to smile, but have to sigh,  
When care is pressing you down a bit –  
Rest if you must, but don't you quit.*

*Life is queer with its twists and turns,  
As every one of us sometimes learns;  
And many a fellow turns about  
When he might have won, had he stuck it out.  
Don't give up though the pace seems slow –  
You may succeed with another blow.*

*Often the goal is nearer than  
It seems to a faint and faltering man;  
Often the struggler has given up  
When he might have captured the victor's cup;*



*And he learned too late when the night came down,  
How close he was to the golden crown.*

*Success is failure turned inside out  
The silver tint on the clouds of doubt,  
And you never can tell how close you are,  
It may be near when it seems afar;  
So stick to the fight when you're hardest hit –  
It's when things seem worst that you musn't quit.*

Author Unknown, Cited by Erik Weihenmayer, 2001,  
in *Touch the Top of the World*, Hodder Headline, Sydney.pp19-20

There's another little side-story I need to include here on this branch about resilience. As I was taking the photographs for this presentation I was climbing about on a chair, adjusting a light and focussing on books on the shelves. It was then that I saw, *literally through the lens on the camera* Sara Henderson's books on my bookshelf, *From Strength to Strength* and *The Strength in Us All*.



I had sent off my abstract-in-a-poem several months earlier – including the title for this paper and *I had thought that I had thought of the title myself!* I nearly fell of the chair when I realised what I was looking at. As has so often been the case in my life, just when I think I've thought of something clever, it turns out that a brilliant woman has thought of it long before me and quietly planted a seed. This time it was not Maree, but Sara Henderson.

Henderson's books speak powerfully to the themes of this conference – to resilience and *The Strength in Us All*. They also illustrate once again how meaningful texts can become part of who we are without us even being fully conscious of the process.

### **Gardner, leadership & multiple intelligence theory**

The second branch highlighted by the individuals contradicting the stereotype concerns Howard Gardner (1985) and his *theory of multiple intelligences*. Clearly their success could not be attributed to their mastery of literacy – they were all still struggling on this front. One of the bodies of research and theory that we found helpful in understanding what they were doing was supplied by Gardner.

Traditional IQ tests, Gardner argues, have really only considered, or measured, a relatively small part of human intelligence. Most IQ tests assess what he calls a 'narrow band' of intelligence and such tests are usually strongly language or logic based. They are also almost inevitably *culturally biased*. And they usually produce a single score on a scale.

Gardner identifies different kinds of intelligences based upon eight criteria. (which we are not going to explore here)

*“Nowadays ... researchers believe precisely the opposite; that there exists a multitude of intelligences, quite independent of each other; that each intelligence has its own strengths and constraints” (Gardner 1993: xxiii)*

Gardner originally identified seven core intelligences: The first two of these are commonly measured in traditional IQ type tests, namely:

- *Linguistic intelligence* – the intelligence of authors, poets, speech writers, speech makers, story tellers and orators;
- *logical-mathematical* – the intelligence of mathematicians and physicists.

However Gardner also goes on to talk about:

- *Spatial intelligence* the ability to ‘read’ or see, & understand relationships in space; height, width, depth; proportion, angles and so on ... The intelligence of the artist, the architect, the engineer, or like our case study individuals – the bridge builder and the graphic designer;
- Then there is the *bodily-kinesthetic intelligence* of the dancer, the athlete; think (for instance) of Cathy Freeman in athletics, or David Beckham in football, or the great dancers ... Or think of the extraordinary French mime artist Marcel Marceau, a man who united movement, poetry and silence;
- Then there is *musical intelligence* – the ability to understand, interpret and create music – some people are particularly gifted in this domain. I saw a wonderful movie recently called *August Rush*(?) about a child musical prodigy – who could ‘hear the music’ in the world all around him;
- Gardner also wrote about what he called the *personal intelligences: interpersonal* – the ability to ‘read’, relate to, understand and appreciate social and interpersonal dynamics; and also *intrapersonal* – the ability to know self, to know and manage effectively one’s own emotions and intellectual life. This notion of EQ or emotional intelligence has been taken up by others, including Daniel Goleman (1996) who has written about it extensively.

In 1999 Gardner added an eighth, *the naturalistic intelligence*, which is concerned with understanding the natural world, the environment, with its rhythms, patterns and order of things.

Gardner has noted that many, perhaps most formal educational systems tend to focus on a relatively narrow band of intelligence, particularly the first two. As a consequence many students’ abilities in other domains may be unidentified and relatively undeveloped.



Later Gardner applied his multiple intelligence theory to the study of leadership (Gardner 1997).

The individuals in the *Contradicting the Stereotype* study would say of themselves that they were not so strong on the language and literacy front. As a consequence schooling was a pretty miserable experience for most of them - but they identified successfully and built upon their other strengths, including their:

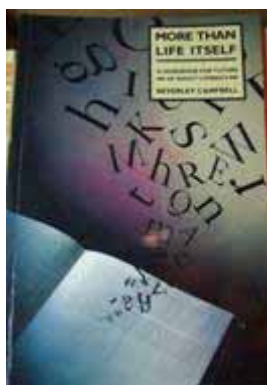
- ❖ Creative, artistic and visual intelligence
- ❖ Inter-personal, team building and relationship management skills
- ❖ Resilience, intra-personal intelligence and knowledge of self
- ❖ Spatial and practical intelligence

## Identity: personal & professional

The third branch to explore here is about issues of identity, identification and ownership. It is about personal and public identity/ies. Becoming 'literate' is not simply a matter of skills acquisition, it is a matter of identity. Conceiving oneself as reader and writer is important. *Literacy is socially and culturally shaped and yet it must be personally constructed.*

My abstract-in-a-poem referred to this identity theme. *Identity* is still an ongoing series of questions for me. But I am not alone, even at this conference there are others exploring the connections between literacy, teaching, learning, and identity.

I understand Stephen Black, for instance, is going to be reflecting upon what it means to be an adult basic education teacher – and how this has changed over the past decade or so. And I suspect he will discuss what may have been lost with this change. It seems to me that, at least in part, he will be exploring issues of identity.



Bev Campbell and Lynne Matheson are exploring professional identities in their workshop. If I go to the bookshelf again I see texts here which reflect this theme. Bev's book *More than Life Itself*, was published by VALBEC in 1991. As I thumb through it again now I see examples of teaching and learning strategies which illustrate strength-based practice – and the connections between literacy and personal identity. The book's title comes from a student's statement which also reflects the intimate connections between life as we live it, literacy, and learning.

*"You've got to stick with it, you've got to want it more than life itself. You've got to have a drive inside you to keep on doing it. It's a slow process. It's not something that happens overnight. It happens all the time without us being aware of it. We are always learning."* (Susan Power, in Campbell, 1991:11)

Bev's most recent publication, *Reading the Fine Print* (Campbell 2008) is also wonderful. In simple terms we might say it is a history of the Victorian Adult Literacy and Basic Education Council (VALBEC) between 1978 and 2008. However it is so much more than this – this is a multi-dimensional social history. It is an extraordinarily rich *exploration* and *exposition* of an evolving field of practice. It is about Bev's personal journey – and her evolving professional self; it is her-story as well as history. Given the significant role that women have played in the development of the adult literacy field I think of this text as a landmark *Herstory*.



There's not the scope to fully explore here the depth and range of Bev's analysis of the adult literacy landscape; policy, philosophy, pedagogy, politics and personalities, all are revealed – as is *the struggle for a professional identity for adult literacy educators*. The tides, currents, waves and winds of the (sometimes troubled) waters of adult literacy are exposed and whilst this is essentially a Victorian story – it is also a distinctively Australian story – and a story for the world.

To cite just a couple of other side branches on the identity branch at this conference: Christine Holland says she is exploring *the development of trade identities* with apprentices in her session.

Then we have presenters exploring literacy issues with indigenous learners. I'm willing to bet that there are identity issues in Geri Pancini's discussion of "Both Ways" learning – and in Sandra Land's discussion of dominant languages and their hegemonic effects.

It seems to me that Grant Cole and Lisa James may also be engaging with identity questions as they explore the idea of a plasterer teaching maths. What does it mean to be a teacher anyway? How does someone who thinks of himself (or herself) as a plasterer come to grips with the thought of being a maths teacher – or vice versa? Perhaps Grant and Lisa can tell us.

So literacy is intimately tied up with issues of identity. Human learning and change processes are complex. I've known people to be highly motivated for change in their lives – people who desperately *wanted* change; they're highly motivated, but *they continue to behave in ways that prevent the changes they desire from taking place.*

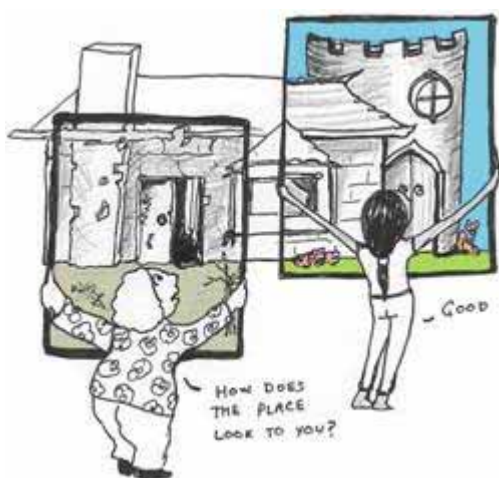
Perhaps issues of identity are involved here. Perhaps the desired changes require me to do things I don't normally do – they require me to *be* a different sort of person – someone I've not been before – someone that's *not really me* ... that's difficult.

It's difficult to consciously 'unlearn' who we are; it's uncomfortable and challenging to recognise how *who we are might be part of the problem.* To make these shifts requires new skills in re-cognition and appreciation of self, the ability to perceive self (and others) differently. We have to see existing behaviours in a new light and different behaviours through a different lens.

## Working from Strengths

This leads me to one of the more recent publications on my bookshelf. It's not a massive volume – it's a slender little spiral bound number – and if you're interested it's readily available as a downloadable PDF file, free from NCVET at <http://www.ncver.edu.au/publications/1956.html>

We found a body of literature and practice in the community services and health sector which seemed to provide us with some useful leads on these issues of change and personal development. We found professionals in the community services and health sector who had been using forms of strength-based practice in therapeutic settings for some time. Their practice, we felt, might offer some useful insights for work in the adult basic education sector.



As we explored strength-based practice in this comparative study we came to appreciate the significance of *point of view* or *perspective*. In this graphic (left) we see the person on the left looking through *her* frame and asking 'How does it seem to you'? Whilst her friend on the right, looking through *her* frame at the same 'reality' is getting quite a different picture. Either of these people could be a teacher – or a learner.

It is important to appreciate that our point of view, or perspective, is *shaped by our previous experience*. It might seem surprising – but we don't all see the same thing – our point of view and our experience determines what we 'see'.

Perceptions and point of view are important in strength based practice. You might consider how *your point of view – as an adult literacy teacher, or researcher, or*

*numeracy teacher*, is different to that of others with whom you come into contact - and how is their point of view different to yours? Think about the advantages (and disadvantages) of these different points of view.

- ❖ Are you looking at the situation from the point of view of: a woman? A teacher? A volunteer? An Indigenous person? An overseas visitor?
- ❖ How does your perspective give you a different 'picture' or a different 'angle' on the situation, the problem, the issue – or the opportunity?

Strength-based practice suggests *it is useful to pay attention to the language we use* and in particular, the way we use language with our clients, customers, learners – and colleagues.

Another useful metaphor we identified is that of the lens – whose lens are we using to view the situation?

- ❖ And *are we aware of the lens we are using?*
- ❖ Where did this lens come from? Who, or where did we get it from?
- ❖ Have we ever questioned the view of the world which this lens gives us?
- ❖ Would this situation look *exactly* the same if we viewed it through a different lens?
- ❖ What if we used the TAFE teacher's lens? Or what if we used the students lens?
- ❖ What if we looked at this situation through the eyes of the employers who might wish to employ our graduates?



In this graphic (left) the teacher asks an adult literacy learner “why does the classroom worry you so much?”

She sees no threat in the teacher or academic work until she takes the glasses through which the student is viewing the situation (right).



I'm reminded here of words of wisdom from literature, from another book on my shelf. In the great American novel *To Kill A Mockingbird*, the principal character Atticus tells his granddaughter about a simple trick. This is what he says,

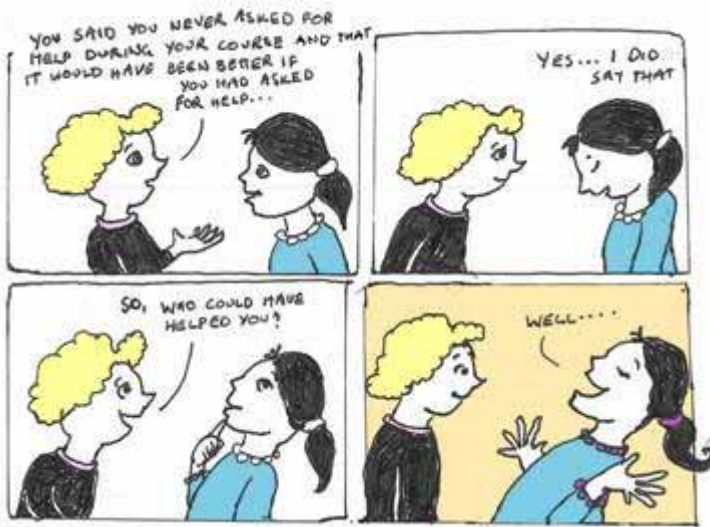
*"First of all," he said, "if you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you'll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view-"*

*"Sir?"*

*"-until you climb into his skin and walk around in it".*

*Strength based practice* involves the same kind of commitment. A preparedness to view the world through others eyes – and to with-hold judgment and search for positives where they may not be immediately obvious.

Another key theme which emerged from our investigation of strength-based practice – and which was also evident in the *Contradicting the Stereotype* stories, concerned asking for help.



Asking for help can be a real strength, but sometimes people may need help in asking for help.

In this cartoon the teacher picks up on a comment made by the learner. “You said you never asked for help during your course and that it would have been better if you had asked for help ... So who could have helped you?”

The question opens up possibilities for action and for self-help.

- ❖ We might also ask “How could they have helped?”
- ❖ What would be most helpful for you?
- ❖ What would you find helpful?
- ❖ How can I help?

So often we think we have the answers – when what we really need to do is find the right questions. Questions which allow others to find their own ways forward and to ask for the help they need.

Another metaphor which we found useful was the metaphor of the boat. Two Swedish educators who have pioneered the use of strength based approaches in education highlight the relationship between the teacher and the student –

“Let us assume that together with the pupil and the parents, we share a goal, but that the pupil has his own idea about how to get there, in his own boat, going his own way. In order to fully support the pupil, we believe that it is meaningless sitting shouting from our boat that he should jump into ours. We find it far more productive to jump into the same boat with the pupil so that we can help each other to row the boat. When we row together, we will reach the goal faster, and it is easier to talk about how we do that when we sit next to each other..” (Mahlberg & Sjoblom 2002: 56) cited in *Working from Strengths*, (Waterhouse & Virgona 2008, p18)



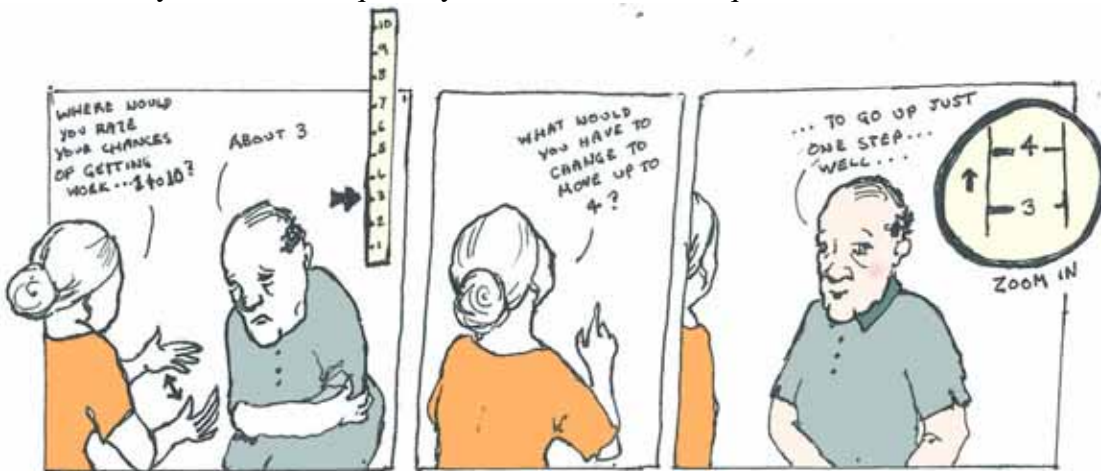
What we found in some of our research is that despite our *rhetoric* about being learner-centred the practice is more like that shown in the second graphic. The boat is the teacher’s and the teacher is clearly the one driving, determining the

direction – whilst the learner sees her boat moving off in another direction.

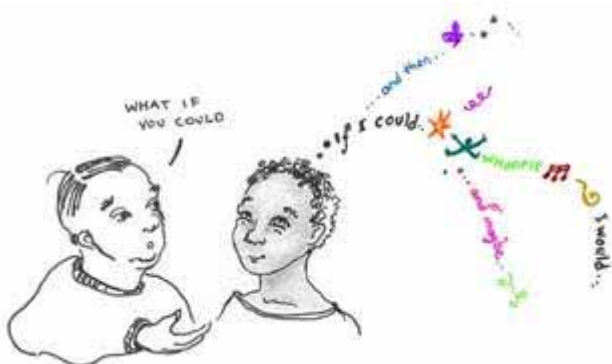
Another metaphor we found interesting in strength based practice is the use of *the scale*. This is a conversational device rather than a physical instrument.

For example, we might ask: ‘How important is it for you to learn to read and write? On a ten-point scale, if one means it doesn’t matter that much and ten means it is one of the most important things in your life, where would you stand?’

Of course such a question could be framed around other objectives: How important is it for you to complete this apprenticeship, or be a hairdresser, or to succeed in this job? Offering the scale gives a learner a way to frame and quantify an answer to such a question.



When rating progress, the practitioner may ask the client what it would take to move up a point on the scale? This question will reveal the next step, although the practitioner must always be mindful of a person’s need to control their own destiny. At the end of the consultation, the person goes away with a plan of what *they* will do to create change in their circumstances. The agency for change is not handed over to the professional/practitioner. It is the responsibility of the individual, the client – the learner.



Finally, another useful language tool is the so called *miracle question*:

“For example, ‘If you woke up tomorrow morning and found the problem had gone away completely, how would your life be different?’”

This technique assists the client to envisage another world and stand in a different space. The practitioner works with the client to probe the vision.

What would look different? What would people say to you? What changes would they notice? How does it feel? What is it like in a problem-free space?” (Waterhouse & Virgona 2008, p.33). This positive visioning enables the learner or client to see possibilities and begin to move towards them.

This approach is consistent with contemporary approaches to change management. For instance Mitchell and Young (2001) note that:

*Traditionally change management focused on resistance to change and finding ways to overcome the resistance. Contemporary approaches to change aim at creating visions and desired futures, gaining political support for them and managing the transition ... towards them. (Mitchell & Young 2001:10)*

## Coming to Coffee Break

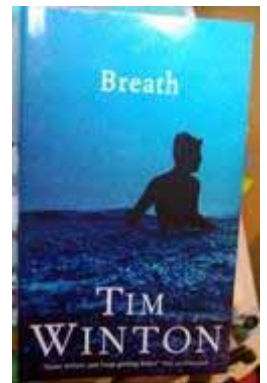
We're coming up to our coffee break. If I wanted to sum up some key points about what we've learned from looking at strength-based practice. I might say:

- ❖ People do want to change (although they don't want to be changed by others).
- ❖ The solution is already there (although not always immediately visible).
- ❖ Focus on the future and the present, rather than the past.
- ❖ Effective, empowering relationships are very important.
- ❖ Shift the thinking *and the language* from problems to solutions.
- ❖ There are times when the problem is not obvious or so constraining; these times can be retrieved and extended to become the way the client normally functions.

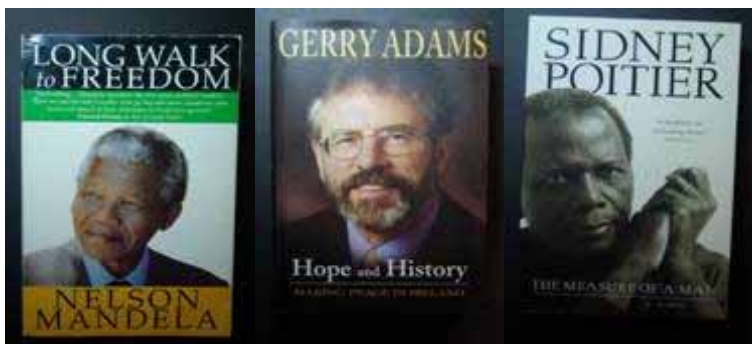
That's what this strength-based research is saying to me – and such bullet points are fine enough.

However we began with the bookshelf and the biographies and that's where I'd like to finish up. We've only touched on some of the books on my shelves. We have focussed mostly on biographies and research reports – but we could have explored fiction from our bookshelves.

And because I'm here in Western Australia; I have to ask, have you read *Breath*, Tim Winton's (2008) latest novel? If you haven't I highly recommend it. It's a beautiful, poignant and powerful story, distinctively Australian – set on the coast, here in the west. Winton has this remarkable ability to reach out into the universe, to grasp important things, distil them down to their very essence, and put them into paper sandwiches we can eat with our minds. He's a genius and I don't think he's done it any better than he has in *Breath*.

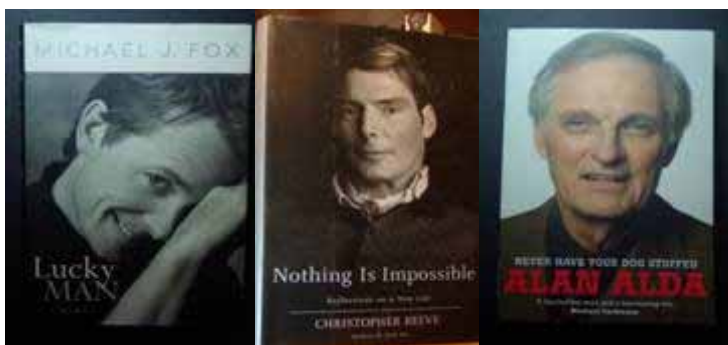


So our stories of inspiration can come from all sorts – including fiction – which of course carries its own truth. But I don't know where to stop.



Did I mention Nelson Mandella's (1995) *Long Walk to Freedom*, or Gerry Adams' (2003), *Hope and History: Making Peace in Ireland*?

Should I talk about Sydney Poitiers' (2000) beautiful, forceful and thought provoking memoir, *The Measure of a Man*?

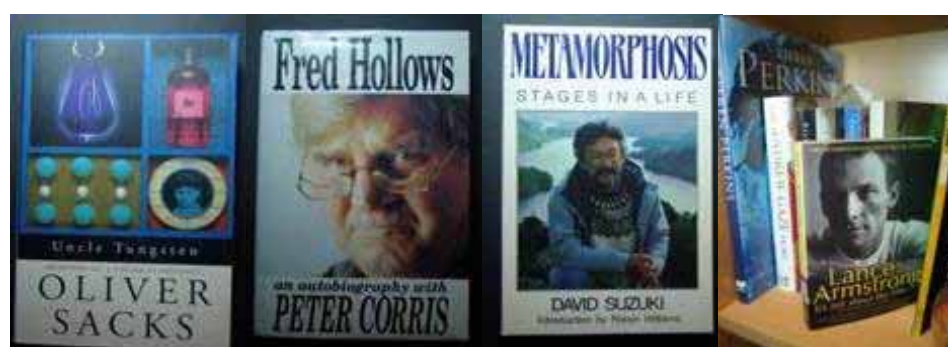


What about Michael J Fox's (2002) account of life with Parkinson's disease, titled *Lucky Man*; or 'Superman' Christopher Reeve's (2002) reflections on life as a quadriplegic, in *Nothing Is Impossible*, or Alan Alda's (2007) wonderful wry and insightful memoir, *Never Have Your Dog Stuffed*.

What about Ian Gawler's extraordinary story of surviving cancer (Allenby 2008) and the pioneering work he has done since on mind-body medicine, meditation and well-being.

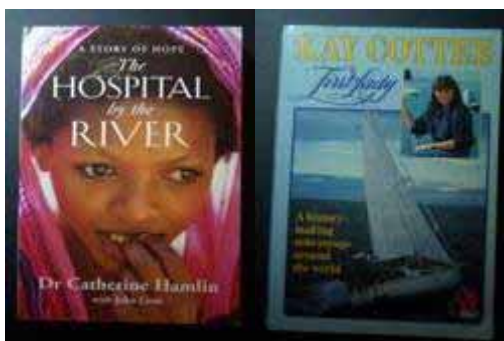


Perhaps Lincoln Hall (2007) was just *Dead Lucky* to survive a night alone, in the 'death zone' high on Mount Everest but his account of the experience suggests otherwise; like Aron Ralston (2004) who was stuck *Between a Rock and a Hard Place*, he called upon extraordinary personal qualities to survive in exceptional circumstances.



Can I stop short of mentioning *Uncle Tungsten* the memoir of the remarkable Oliver Sacks (2001); or *Fred Hollows'* (1991) autobiography; or David Suzuki's (1988) *Metamorphosis*?

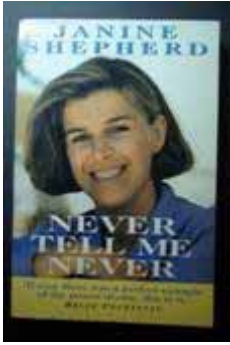
How can I not include Lance Armstrong (2002) who tells us, *It's Not About the Bike*?



And there are extraordinary women who inspire me with their stories.

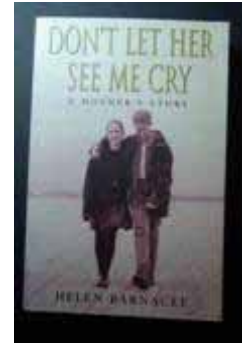
What about Dr Catherine Hamlin's *Hospital By the River* (Hamlin & Little 2003) which has saved and totally transformed thousands of Ethiopian women's lives.

What about Kay Cottee's (1989) *First Lady*; an account of her historic solo voyage around the world.



Or we could talk about Janine Shepherd's (1997) story of recovery from injuries which smashed her body to the point she was not expected to live, let alone walk again, or learn to fly, or become a commercial flying instructor, or a mother. *Never Tell Me Never* is an apt title for her memoir.

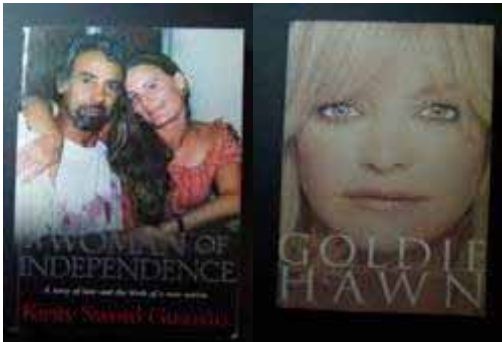
Speaking of inspirational mothers, what about Helen Barnacle's (2000) *Don't Let Her See Me Cry*; a gut wrenching account of raising her daughter in prison – and her own journey from a hopeless young heroin addict to a successful psychologist, drug counsellor and prison reform campaigner.



Or should I mention Kirsty Sword Gusmao (2003) as *A Woman of Independence*?

Or the brilliant business woman, producer-artist and actor Goldie Hawn (2006), who reminds us *A Lotus Grows in the Mud*.

The list could go on and on ...



When I go back to my story and to my bookshelf I'm compelled to say that we are each unique. One of the profound contradictions and complexities of life is that we are all both ordinary (like the "Average Student", or the 'average' man or woman in the street) and yet, at the same time, we are, each and every one of us, *unique, special, different* and *extraordinary*.

In a sense we are all 'abnormal'. As Margaret, from our *Contradicting the Stereotype* study – said, "What's 'Normal' anyway? 'Normal' is a button on a washing machine."

I collect inspirational stories and biographies because they remind me constantly of the power and the potential of human beings. Many of these people have learned to embrace their 'abnormality'. They have come to see their individuality, their uniqueness, as a strength which they have a responsibility to develop and share with the world.

I loved the guy who said to Andrew Denton on TV, "*Be yourself. Everyone else is taken!*"

These people show us what is possible – even when it seems impossible.  
They show us courage, compassion, creativity and resilience.  
They show us humour and hope.

They show us our humanity.  
They show us *The Strengths in Us All*.

Thank you for listening.

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