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Jonar Nader is a digital-age philosopher and educator who has worked and consulted for some of the world's largest organisations, including Compaq, Acer, and IBM. ★ He was the co-founder of the Information Technology Society and the New Leaders Foundation. ★ He is the author of *How to Lose Friends and Infuriate Your Boss* (in its 2nd edition), *How to Lose Friends and Infuriate People* (in its 5th edition), *How to Lose Friends and Infuriate Thinkers*, *How to Lose Friends and Infuriate Lovers* and *How to Lose Friends and Infuriate Competitors*. His first novel, called 'Z', is a suspense thriller, now in paperback. He is also the author of *Prentice Hall's Illustrated Dictionary of Computing* (in its 3rd edition), and the technology writer for *Butterworth's Legal Dictionary* (in its 2nd edition), and the *Concise Legal Dictionary* (in its 3rd edition). ★ Jonar is a lecturer, corporate presenter, and consultant in the areas of technology, leadership, management, thinking skills, teamwork, employee engagement, marketing, advertising, and national security. ★ Jonar is a broadcaster, journalist, futurist, technologist, and social commentator, and has worked as a magazine editor and writer for a range of international fashion, art, advertising, motor racing, and technology magazines. ★ Through his company Logictivity, Jonar advises many chairmen and CEOs. He also assists executives when they need technical, professional, market, or management advice. He can be contacted via:

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TAKE CONTROL OF YOUR CAREER

Second Edition

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JONAR NADER

How to Lose Friends and Infuriate Your Boss

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I am indebted to each of my ex-bosses.

THE *vulgar* BOSSES
FORCED ME TO LEARN ABOUT RESPECT.

THE *selfish* BOSSES
HELPED ME TO UNDERSTAND COMPASSION.

THE *generous* BOSSES
ALLOWED ME TO SPREAD MY WINGS.

THE *patient* BOSSES
KEPT ME ON THE STRAIGHT AND NARROW.



THIS BOOK IS DEDICATED TO
THE *ghastly* BOSSES
WHO GAVE ME AMPLE REASONS
TO FOCUS ON MY CAREER
SO THAT I COULD ESCAPE FROM THEIR GRIP.

IT IS ALSO DEDICATED TO
THE *gracious* BOSSES
WHO ALLOWED ME TO MAKE MISTAKES
FROM WHICH I WAS ABLE TO LEARN
ABOUT FAILURE AND SUCCESS.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EARLY BIRD
CATCHES THE
BOOKWORM

From university to adversity

*Getting an education
means becoming conscious
of what we don't know.*

*Getting a promotion
means becoming conscious
of what others don't know.*

FOR YEARS, I HAVE BEEN A CRITIC OF COMMERCIALISED EDUCATION, SAYING THAT STUDYING AT UNIVERSITY IS, MORE OFTEN than not, a waste of time for those who go there in the ‘hope’ that they might find a direction. Unless they have a specific purpose for obtaining particular qualifications, students are likely to regret their actions. This chapter outlines salient points about how education relates to personal development. It points the way to a satisfying and rewarding career — with or without the help of formal education.

The first step is to acknowledge that no level of qualification is useful for prospective students, until they know the direction that they want to take. Alas, most students approach this problem in reverse, attending a university to *find* a direction. Such a process is futile. Tertiary studies ought to fuel *existing* passions, not ignite new passions. Studying a subject merely to seek a qualification, so as to impress employers or peers, is not being true to oneself.

Any criticism levelled at education does not pertain to *learning*. Fostering an inquiring mind and learning how to develop (and later to feed) an insatiable appetite for knowledge ought to be the *second*-most urgent pursuit of the intelligent being.

OUR UNEDUCATED PIONEERS

Many of the products and technologies that we use today were given to us by *uneducated* pioneers.

At your next social gathering, ask your friends this question: ‘Think of the ten major inventions or developments of all time that you would deem to have been the most important for society’s progress.’ Perhaps each of the ten would have been given to us by pioneers who, if lined up today, would not pass a basic university entrance examination. In their day, they might not even have been respected citizens.

Imagine attending a concert where you are entertained by sixty leading musicians performing some of the most energising music you have heard. How would you react to being told that the composer does not read music? It seems impossible that such a person can compose breathtaking masterpieces for a sixty-piece orchestra! One such musician is Yanni Chryssomallis.

Who says that Yanni has to read sheet music? Which came first, music notation or music composition? Surely notation and sheet music *reflect* what musicians do best so that the rest of the world can learn from their talent.

Beethoven composed music while completely deaf, yet many of us would expect that hearing is a prerequisite for composing and performing. We need to adjust our understanding of what it means to be an expert of our craft.

Leading-edge thinkers are years ahead of educators in institutions. Thinkers go about their business by innovating, devising, inventing, building, and paving the way so that other people can benefit from better products and improved processes.

Universities do not create brilliant people. They merely seek the knowledge that brilliant people possess, and repackage it in the form of information. The recent information-technology industry that has changed many aspects of our life (and kept the economy buoyant) was propelled by non-graduates. Universities could not keep up with what these innovators developed. School dropouts were innovative, so universities rushed to observe what was going on. Entire faculties were built to capture the fury of an emerging industry. The innovators were the inspired and talented, not necessarily the university-educated.

*An insatiable
appetite
for knowledge
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of the
intelligent
being*

Nowadays we are hearing more about the importance of 'knowledge'. The slogan 'knowledge is power' is misleading. Knowledge is not in itself power. Rather, power comes from the application of knowledge.

THE GRAND ILLUSION

Many students are under the grand illusion that they can ‘become something’, merely by undertaking the appropriate course. When they make a decision about the profession they want to pursue, they genuinely believe that all they have to do is get the right marks, apply to a university, and if they are lucky enough to be selected, they can be on their way to reaching their goal.

We live in a world of ‘instant gratification’ whereby we want answers and pleasures immediately. We expect to see results straight away. We are impatient when we go in search of joy and ecstasy. We dislike waiting for medication to work, and we expect speedy recoveries. We want paint to dry instantly, and we want beauty products to enhance our features without delay. Yet, strangely enough, there are still some things for which we are prepared to wait. For example, many people are prepared to go through tiresome routines and long time-frames to attain a goal. Prepared to work hard all year at a job that they do not particularly like, they wait patiently for a holiday, thinking that eleven months of misery can be alleviated by four weeks away at a resort.

It is with the same perverse sense of delayed fulfilment that people are prepared to invest years into tertiary education, hoping that they will eventually find an excellent job. They also believe that the more they study, the more likely they will find employment in an exciting industry, working

for an innovative company. This is the promise that many students want to believe in — just like we all want to believe in the perfect marriage and the blissful loving relationship. Unfortunately, the problem with following such a dream is that by the time we find out that we have been misled, it is often too late to reclaim our energy and our youth. Seeking job-satisfaction by undertaking tertiary education is often a gamble. Gambling life away with idealistic fantasies at education institutions that paint rosy pictures, is folly.

*Universities
do not create
brilliant people*

Interestingly, institutions espouse the benefits of education, yet they are not responsible for delivering on the promises they make. There are no guarantees. There is no recourse at the end if you find that you do not have an advantage after all.

THE MODERN RATIONALE FOR TERTIARY STUDIES

Students have many reasons for attending college, not dissimilar to the varied reasons why some people attend church. Their faith might draw them to worship with their community. Some attend for social reasons, others attend out of habit, or because their parents force them to go. Some might be there to steal a glimpse of their sweetheart. They might pursue their religious activities out of hope, fear, guilt, or custom. Some churchgoers attend for the sake of their partner or children; others attend with neither a sense of purpose, nor conviction, but through obligation or indifference.

University students do not all share the same reasons for enrolling. Most of them harbour fantasies or ill-founded preconceived notions about what university life could offer. After they enrol and attend lectures, reality sets in whereby their decision to complete their course is based upon a *modified* set of ideals or pressures. Those who endure the course begrudgingly, do so to avoid social humiliation or personal shame and defeat. Undoubtedly, there are students who have a balanced and healthy perspective on the value of tertiary studies, but such folk are rare.

Those of you who are tertiary students, or are hoping to engage in tertiary studies, are urged to question and to understand why you want to pursue this direction. Do you know what the essence of your desire is, and why you want to undertake such studies?

Some of the many and varied reasons that students attend college or university are listed below. Why they are attracted in the first place, or why they pursue their studies, says much about their hopes, dreams, fears, and inadequacies.

A. TO OPEN THE RIGHT DOORS

We have built a social infrastructure that demands specific academic qualifications that are integral to ‘opening the right doors’. Some industries have built fortresses to protect their professional and financial interests. Without the approved tertiary studies, students would never be permitted to enrol

in some associations, such as those that protect the medical or legal networks. Those who desire to become lawyers or doctors are in non-negotiable situations where they must follow the academic path set out before them. The respective fraternities would argue that their strict policies are designed to protect people from would-be ‘sharks’ who would take advantage of consumers and deliver sub-standard services. There is merit in this argument. Unfortunately, the hoops through which lawyers and doctors have to jump have not produced the desired results. Unprofessional, unethical, incompetent, and unscrupulous practitioners abound.

There are people, from all walks of life, who truly believe that doors would open for them if they were to obtain qualifications. Some employers are impressed with candidates who flaunt their degrees. Such employers are also likely to be easily distracted by a person’s exclusive address, family name, perceived social connections, or good looks. People are impressionable. The question is, are you prepared to invest (or waste) three to seven years of your life to obtain a qualification with a view to satisfying an *unknown* future-employer who might well salivate at your double major, but turn you away because you are the wrong gender?

If you are studying because you believe that a qualification will open a door, you had better know on whose door you are knocking

If you are studying because you believe that a qualification will open a door, you had better know on whose door

you are knocking, and what the decision-maker is likely to find impressive or unimpressive.

B. TO IMPRESS FRIENDS

Some of us fantasise about being surrounded by friends who will approve of us. We think of those whom we would most dearly want as our friends, and then we start to imagine what we have to do to attract their attention or to win their favour. They become our mirror, and their approval becomes the most important prize to secure. To that end, we might change the colour of our hair or the clothes we wear. We might change our lifestyle, where we live, what we drive (whether we can afford it or not), and take up hobbies and activities that we hope will take us closer to them.

Passing a course does not always prove intelligence, but demonstrates persistence

This fixation with pleasing others is common in all societies and for all age groups. The possession of tertiary qualifications sometimes falls into this category, and it is understandable that people presume that their studies might impress others. If that is your aim, be sure to weigh up your decision against the time and energy that your studies would require. Be certain that the person you wish to impress is interested in your academic standing.

You need to know that there are people who are not impressed by qualifications. Do not blind yourself by unsubstantiated perceptions. It is too high a price to pay to obtain

qualifications as corporate accessories. Remember that prestige is not universal. It is an intangible concept that carries weight only in the eye of the beholder.

Some students are not out to impress others. They commit to a study program to set themselves a personal challenge; to obtain a degree is part of a personal mission to prove to themselves that they have the stamina and the discipline. This is understandable and commendable. While some choose the academic path, others undertake similar arduous endeavours such as sailing around the world, or running a marathon. Seen from this perspective, tertiary studies would make a reasonable alternative, so long as the journey does not become clouded by an unhealthy fixation on the end-point. A mature person would feel satisfied with the journey, while an immature person would seek accolades. A well-balanced person would feel invigorated by the experience, while a confused person would seek social rewards.

There is a considerable 'show-off' factor associated with acquiring letters after one's name. Some executives magnify what little advantage they have by framing their certificates and flaunting their college crest. Their business cards are reprinted to highlight the newly-acquired qualifications, and their e-mail sign-off boasts the many associations to which they belong.

Academic qualifications are for biographies and résumés, yet many qualifications have no relation to people's current positions. A sales clerk of an automotive company

whose business card reads 'John Smith BSc' says little of John Smith, or the relevance of his degree to his current job, or of his ability. At best, passing a course does not always prove intelligence, but demonstrates persistence.

C. TO IMPRESS EMPLOYERS

In some countries and in some industries, there are employers who are more impressed with your *brand* than your degree — meaning that they want qualifications from those universities that boast a recognisable and prestigious crest.

Many employers stipulate tertiary qualifications, more so to impress their clients than to capitalise on your creativity. Take a look at their annual reports wherein they publicise the precise number of highly-qualified staff that they employ.

Those who lack self-esteem boast about external factors in the hope that others might deem them worthy. Yes, some employers do discriminate against those without tertiary qualifications. Job advertisements stipulate that only the degree-qualified should apply.

Students say that they want to secure qualifications lest they be excluded from employment opportunities. In these situations, all that a degree would do is allow the candidate to stand at the front door alongside every other hopeful applicant. Given that the number of qualified candidates is high, what then shall be the sifting point?

Do you want to work for an employer who believes

that a dynamic team comprises not the best person for the job, but the best candidate who happened to attend college for a few years? That elitist approach is short-sighted.

A competent marketing manager at a large international hotel called me. She had been with the chain for seven years, and in the hospitality industry for more than twenty years. She was hoping to apply for the position of marketing director within her hotel. Despite her exceptional performance and enviable track record, she felt the need to enrol at a university to undertake further studies. 'I feel that management might overlook me for the promotion because I do not have tertiary qualifications in hospitality', she confided. It was a difficult task for me to convince her that her work history was infinitely more valuable than an academic qualification.

I discouraged her from undertaking further studies because she was prepared to take on six years of part-time studies to rectify her personal self-doubt, the result of a few conversations she had had with managers whose only excuse for looking to employ outsiders was that she did not possess academic qualifications. If twenty years of experience and a seven-year proven track record within the hotel were no longer sufficient proof of her capabilities, what was amiss with her manager?

The woman's desire to enrol at a local university was not triggered by professional curiosity or a need to learn new skills. Had she expressed a desire to go in search of information or knowledge about a particular aspect of her

profession or industry, or had she identified an area of weakness, I would have encouraged her in that pursuit. Instead, she wanted to surrender a large part of her time to appease others. Life is so precious that one would be committing a crime to waste the years to remedy a non-existent problem.

If this woman had identified areas of weakness in her work, what could she not have taught herself, or have managed to find out through personal investigation and self-paced studies?

D. TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

There are professionals who enjoy the discipline of conducting research and learning through probing in the areas of science, industry, society, or the environment. The personal journey of discovery can be rewarding and fascinating, especially if it leads to profound improvements in human life.

Before engaging in worthwhile investigative projects, students are better served by first gaining commercial experience in their chosen field of endeavour.

There's no excitement in pursuing research without clearly identifying how the findings can be applied to industry or to society. Students who want to become researchers or pioneers often end up as technicians or administrators.

Many students who surrender to the romantic and noble ideologies of laboratory or field research, bow out after a few years when their patience can no longer support their dream. Research is a costly, time-consuming vocation

that requires endless patience and an inquisitive mind. Those who seek instant gratification are often disappointed with this line of work.

E. TO RESPOND TO PRESSURE FROM PARENTS AND PEERS

Pressure from family and friends is often the main reason given by students as to why they attend university. Some parents sponsor tertiary studies either because *they* were not afforded that opportunity, or because they believe that the workforce discriminates against those who do not pursue tertiary studies.

A few parents endorse university life as a means of instilling more discipline into their offspring. Some parents offload their children to boarding colleges in the hope of domestic peace and quiet.

Many high-school students cannot articulate their plans. Lost and helpless, the burden on them is immense. Although they have years to contemplate their career, they do not take the matter seriously. All of a sudden, they are expected to find a path and to pursue a profession. This is a cruel situation. It would be fabulous if students could feel a sense of excitement about their career. More often than not, these young people see work as boring, and they see studies as laborious. Activity without a zestful purpose

*Allow children
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is mind-numbing and regrettable. The education system fails each and every time that students cannot look forward to their career with enthusiasm and delight.

When parents become distressed about their children's apparent lack of direction, they insist that a university course would hold their children in good stead. If the children cannot suggest a better option, they lose the argument, and are forced to enrol in the 'best' course that their marks will allow.

There are students who do not set their sights on a profession, but on a 'range of marks' that they feel capable of attaining. This is hardly a process that engenders excellence and excitement.

Some students want to escape domestic responsibilities, so they follow their friends to college. Together, they pursue a life of sports, social activities, and some studies.

There are times when children's dreams are not approved of by their parents, especially if they involve studies that are not considered to be mainstream. Conservative parents express concern about children who seek to further their studies in the area of sports, theatre, or entertainment. The typical argument ends with the parents shouting, 'Get yourself real qualifications so that you can get a real job.' They fear that life within the arts is reserved for the lucky few. A similar struggle was played out in the movie *Dead Poets' Society* wherein a student called Neil Perry is torn between his desires for a career in the theatre and his father's demands that he study to become a doctor. Neil finally sees

the light and says, 'For the first time in my life, I know what I want to do!' Unfortunately, his overbearing father exerts too much authority, and Neil commits suicide.

It is an indictment on our developed Western society that there is such a high suicide rate among modern youth, despite belonging to the most privileged generation of all time. Our young people are: better able to express themselves; free to travel farther and more frequently; in possession of more disposable income; able to access more credit; presented with broader-based career choices at a younger age; granted more opportunities to start their own business; less inclined to heed taboos or to become embroiled in social paranoia; and able to access technology, medicine, education, welfare, and a host of social support structures. Yet, they also belong to the generation that is: more dependent on illicit and prescription drugs; more depressed; least satisfied; least engaged in society; and more prone to commit suicide than in previous generations.

Societal pressures about education and careers contribute to overwhelming personal anxiety. Parents need to allow children to follow their heart's desires. If a spark of interest exists, it should be fanned and encouraged.

Students rarely pursue a job within the area of their studies. Most economics students do not pursue a job within the sphere of economics, for instance. Therefore, it is pointless to argue about the field of studies. It is more important that young students learn how to nurture sparks of enthusiasm.

Which would you rather? Students who are excited to wake up each morning and engage in a line of study that stimulates their heart and soul, or miserable children from whom youth is stolen in the name of speculative comfort?

Young people need to taste for themselves the wonders of life. It is far more important for teenagers to learn *how* to follow a dream than to wait and hope for the right dream to unfold before them.

F. TO PURSUE A CAREER WITH PASSION

There are students who know exactly what they want and where they are heading. They are highly focussed and single-minded about their foray into academia. They pursue tertiary courses purposefully while they prepare the foundations for a well-planned career. Such students display a healthy perspective about tertiary studies for career development.

Universities are not the only institutions that can offer the desired tuition. There are effective ways in which students can gain valuable knowledge from mentors, coaches, professionals, libraries, and specialist training courses. If students know what they need to learn, they can take charge of their learning program.

When people tell me that they wish to acquire an MBA or PhD, I ask them why they cannot go in search of the knowledge without the formalised structure. Invariably, there is an egotistical basis for their decision. By the time they realise their error, they find it difficult to pull out, for

fear of being labelled a ‘dropout’ or a failure. Under such circumstances, students quickly re-adjust their priorities and concede that their main aim is now to ‘complete’ the course, not to expand their mind.

I have met many Masters students who cursed the arduous course. All of them graduated (whether they deserved to or not) because their universities could not justify taking thousands of dollars for a course that does not deliver that all-important piece of paper. After graduation, they reminisced about the learning curve, convincing themselves that the course was worthwhile. They probably learned important lessons about human interaction, human pecking order, group dynamics, time management, and research procedures. Unfortunately, they failed to grasp a superior knowledge about the subject-matter that they initially sought.

G. TO ENGAGE IN A HOBBY

Tertiary studies have a lot to offer to those who want to find a mentally-engaging past-time. If treated as a hobby, it can be rewarding to delve into new and unfamiliar territories to stimulate the brain. Some people enjoy the challenge of ‘studentship’.

Hobbies should not turn into a boring slog. There are examinations to pass. If you take your learning processes too casually, and you do not want to maintain the required discipline of completing assignments on time, you stand to be marked down and to be excluded from subsequent classes.

Take a close look at the entire course before you enrol, and investigate and compare other courses from other institutions before committing to formal training. A hobby should serve your needs, not the other way around.

CHECKMATE

Many high-school students lack direction and personal vision. They are more inclined to hang on to the education thread and go to university, hoping to work out later where they can go. If you are such a student, I can confidently say that if you cannot articulate your direction in your final year of high-school, you will be none the wiser in your final year of university. If you feel scared and lost now, you will feel more fearful when you graduate and realise that your degree or diploma has not illuminated your path.

More disturbing, are students who hold a high opinion of their qualifications. This leads them to refuse any work that does not sound grand or does not offer above-average salaries. They might succumb and accept a job with an organisation on the basis that they are getting a foot in the door. The unchallenging nature of their work often leads them to feel that they need to retreat to university to undertake additional studies to obtain more qualifications. They do this in the hope that they might be taken more seriously the next time they enter the workforce. After another three years of studies, they begrudge the fact that the workforce does not seem to recognise their attainments. Employers do

not want to pay large salaries to candidates who do not have practical experience.

Many students say that they are studying because they want to increase their skills and expand their knowledge. They insist that they are not interested in big-noting themselves with their qualifications. Then I ask them this telling question: 'If you were not allowed to tell your prospective employer about your academic achievements, would you go through the agony of obtaining a degree?' This question leaves them speechless. They had convinced themselves that their studies were for their own intellectual benefit. Yet, when asked to keep their academic qualifications a secret, they panic. Deep down, most students labour for years so that they can impress future employers. They rarely listen to the voice of sanity until they leave the academic nest and go in search of 'advantage' while waving their degree about the town. It is then that they feel the heavy burden of their misplaced youth. By this stage, time, money, patience, and dreams would have run out. They are far too old to run back to their parents for support, so they either seek welfare, or work part-time for ages. You can meet such people who are permanent part-time workers. They might work as restaurant waiters for three years, yet they cannot bring themselves to admit that this is their full-time employment. They see themselves as 'executives-in-waiting'.

No doubt, my helping students to ask the right questions will upset many academics. Institutions have been

trying to create a perception that their courses add esoteric personal value. When certain qualifications proliferate in a society, the bar is raised higher so that graduates are lured back in search of more feathers for their cap. These actions are along similar lines to the ways in which credit and debit cards are promoted. At first, there was the green card, the gold card, and now there is the platinum card. Soon, black, red, and diamond smart-cards will be the rage. The issuers are keen to maintain the 'social' (not practical) status of each colour because they know that the features and benefits offered are not sufficiently different to justify the annual fee. A similar shifting game occurs with airlines that try to maintain a sense of exclusivity. Instead of offering superior service to *all* their clients, they discriminate against those who cannot keep up with the latest colour.

Universities and colleges, who assist students to learn, need not be concerned about my warnings. I do not have an issue with ethical institutions that create professionals. I am opposed to universities and colleges that prey on people's weaknesses and fears.

THE SPIDER WEB AND THE TRAIN TRACK

Many young people have the impression that their career must follow a socially-approved path whereby they first attain qualifications and then get a job. Of the dozens of successful people whose careers I have observed, I do not know of any whose success came about through following the

linear (straight line) path set before them by the education system or by society.

Those who signal their desire to take a different path are smothered by limiting language like, ‘You should wait your turn for a promotion,’ or ‘You are too young.’ Often they are told to be patient and tolerant, and they are reminded that ‘good things come to those who wait’. These maxims are misleading. Although it is prudent to learn when to be patient and tolerant, it is just as important to discern when and how to be *impatient* and *intolerant* by moving independently to create your own path.

Of all the successful people I admire, none of them developed their brilliant and exciting career through the linear approach. Going along the track laid out by the education system seems like a solid and sensible method. Unfortunately, you could miss opportunities that spring up from left field. Flexibility is a vital ingredient for career development.

The winners whom I have studied have followed what I call the ‘spider web’ approach to success. If you take a look at a spider’s web, you would see intricate, strange, messy, yet brilliant paths that interconnect all sorts of junctions. If you can yield to your judgement and intuition, and if you can learn to identify opportunities, you will be able to duck and weave through the confusion of life as you set your sights on the beacons that will guide you on exquisite journeys.

Some of the decisions you make might end up at dead-ends; others might cause you a lot of heartache. So long as

your foundations are solid, and your ethics and values are firm, you will always land on your feet as a stronger, more enlightened explorer who is nimble, versatile, and free.

Think about famous inventors and pioneers. It is likely that they were people of average capabilities and average intelligence who were prepared to get off the track and start their journey on the intricate web of life.

For example, within the music industry you cannot ignore the work of a young dyslexic school ‘dropout’ by the name of Richard Branson. He founded the Virgin Group, and chose the name ‘Virgin’ to denote how inexperienced he was at business. As a young boy he used his pocket money to publish a simple magazine that he later turned into a mail-order music catalogue to sell discounted music. At that time, the British Government had deregulated the music industry, which meant that retailers could decide the price of records. None of the retailers discounted their music, so Branson seized an opportunity to sell discounted music through his magazine. This worked well, until a time when there was a postal strike that disrupted his mail-order business. So Branson opened a small store to sell his music. Later he scouted for talent and launched his own music label, pressing albums for some of the biggest names at the time. All of these twists and turns made Branson what he is today — thanks to a young entrepreneurial spirit. The Virgin Group, with its 200 companies, now employs more than 50 000 people. It is involved in planes, trains, finance, soft drinks, music, mobile

phones, holidays, cars, alcohol, publishing, and bridal wear, to name just a few.

Sir Richard Branson is a perfect example of how someone can move about a web structure and grab opportunities amidst adversity and unbelievable obstacles.

Travelling through the web is not a matter of potluck. Careful calculation, hard work, perceptivity, and an eye for detail are vital ingredients. Such opportunities rarely present themselves along fixed tracks, but they abound on the web of life.

Look around and you will find many more fascinating stories. Oprah Winfrey has overcome tremendous challenges to reach her goals. The Apple computer was developed by two college 'dropouts' who followed their heart against all odds. Henry Ford, a farm boy who left home at sixteen, worked two jobs for most of his life. He was broke and miserable at the age of forty. By the age of fifty he had successfully started the Ford Motor Company that reshaped the motorcar industry. Ford faced troubled times, year after year. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong. Yet he stuck to his dream. He set about to learn what he wanted to learn, when he was ready to learn it.

McDonald's has a similar story. Ray Kroc, a Czechoslovakian boy whose parents migrated to the USA, sold real-estate and played the piano in bars to earn some cash. At the age of fifty-two he was selling milkshake mixers to restaurants. He became curious about why a small

hamburger restaurant (run by the McDonald brothers) was buying so many of his appliances. Kroc encouraged the brothers to expand their business, hoping that this would lead to additional orders for appliances. The brothers did not like the idea of expanding their business. So Kroc decided to franchise the restaurant. He agreed to pay the brothers thirty cents for every hundred dollars of profit. Today, McDonald's has more than 30 000 restaurants in 120 countries, serving forty-five million customers daily.

WHAT'S THE BOTTOM LINE?

Journalists ask me why I choose to be a business consultant when I often criticise business and management. I spend time with executives, not because I care about 'corporations', but because I care about 'people'. My desire for organisations to improve comes from a deep concern about the ways in which humans suffer under the weight of mismanagement and organisational greed. I seek to give businesses what they want on the understanding that their improvements will lead to better conditions for employees. When asked how I propose to 'take on the world', I remind journalists that all I have to do is to serve 'minorities'. It is often the minorities who make the most significant contributions to society.

I am not trying to change the education system. This would be far too difficult. Instead, I want to assist individuals to foster an insatiable appetite for life-long learning, and to dissuade them from falling victim to pressure and

misinformation about the supposed benefits of academic accessories.

THE HIGHEST PRIORITY

Earlier I said that fostering an inquiring mind and learning how to develop, and to later feed, an insatiable appetite for knowledge ought to be the *second*-most urgent pursuit of the intelligent being, no matter what profession or trade is pursued.

Such a statement begs the question, ‘What is the first priority?’ In my opinion, the first priority ought to be this: seek to understand the framework of *wisdom*. Although we can inherit knowledge, technology, money, or material goods, none of us can inherit wisdom. We are all born with a zero measure of wisdom. Learning how to construct it, so that we know when and how to apply it, ought to be our most urgent pursuit.

Wisdom is not something that can be bought. It cannot be read. It cannot be obtained. Nor can it be bequeathed or inherited. Wisdom can only be made fresh on the spot. When I urge people to go in search of wisdom, I am asking them to learn how to *make* wisdom. Wisdom is not like a sequence of mathematical formulae that can be memorised. It is not a recipe that can be handed down from one generation to the next.

My definition of wisdom is the ability to arrive at a decision that we know will not lead to regret. Of all the human

burdens, regret is the most penetrating because it relates to decisions that we make. This means that we are unable to apportion blame to others. The sorrow that drips from regret cannot be abdicated. For more about abdication, see Chapter 7, 'Please cancel my disorder'.

Phrases and quotes that people like to share with each other are indeed words of wisdom, but they are also like photographs. A photo of yourself is not you.

*If I were
unable to
exercise
my option
to be dishonest
with you,
what I say
cannot be
deemed to be
honest*

A snapshot is but a memory of what was. A quotable quote is only a frozen moment when wisdom was constructed for that particular moment. Just as there is no such thing as pre-packaged wisdom, there is no such thing as pre-packaged honesty. Honesty is not something that I can give you right now, unless it can be put in context. It cannot stand on its own in the way that a chair can stand on its own. Like wisdom, honesty can only be constructed when it is required. For honesty to mean anything,

it has to duel with dishonesty. If I were unable to exercise my option to be dishonest with you, what I say cannot be deemed to be honest.

DECLARING MY HAND

I was educated in both private and public schools. I changed countries and schools regularly, and eventually left high-school at the age of fourteen. During that brief

period, I missed out on three years of schooling so in effect, I had the education of an eleven-year-old.

English was not my native tongue. I was introduced to it at the age of eight, and took several years to learn the basics. As a result, I found myself in the ‘E’ class — one reserved for socially awkward children who had learning difficulties, in some cases owing to their brilliance or to their madness. In addition, I faced problems with disorientation until the age of eighteen, having lived in a war-torn country in my formative years.

One of several reasons why I left at fourteen was that I became an ‘A’ student and I was no longer challenged. The schooling process was excruciatingly slow for me. I found full-time employment and pursued part-time studies that continued for six years, eventually leading me to university. That too was unsatisfying because I was able to compare my studies with my real work environment and I observed that the two were like chalk and cheese. I decided to bow out gracefully and take charge of my own education. I was labelled ‘a college dropout’, and I had to contend with explaining myself to prospective employers who were curious or pompous or discriminatory.

Over the years, my appetite for learning and my love for teaching have enabled me to teach business-related subjects to under-graduates and post-graduates. I have designed and delivered courses at various management institutes and technical education centres. To this day, I am a guest

lecturer at universities internationally, and I served as a director of Australia's largest private adult education institution, and as a director of the Sydney College of Divinity.

I have shared this information with you so as to preempt countless e-mails that are likely to ask how I can justify this chapter. I have noticed that readers are eager to learn about the perspective from which an author writes.

There is no doubt that there will be many exceptions to my philosophies. I know a doctor friend of mine who lectures about the hazards of smoking. Invariably, he receives letters from people who disagree with him. They are eager to tell him that their 'ninety-year-old grandmother has been smoking since the age of ten, and she is still in fine health.' Granted, there are smokers who make a mockery of the warnings. Unfortunately, for every such grandmother, there are 5 000 000 people who die each year as a direct result of smoking. Similarly, for every successful, contented, intelligent, and happy academic, there are thousands of bookworms who just do not seem to make it. They are beaten by the early birds who are sometimes called entrepreneurs, geniuses, or dropouts. It has been my experience that the early birds beat the bookworms. **S**