

Turbulent life

On menus and other consuming decisions



The freewheelin' Peter Geyer

Isabel Myers felt
that making good
decisions is hard
for any type to do

Peter Geyer (INTP) pursues the meaning of psychological type and other Jungian ideas on personality, often finding them in unexpected places.

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*Well the man upstairs
Always lends an ear
To the man downstairs
Even though he doesn't care*

John Martyn

*I like a bit of turbulence ...
makes the world go round.*

Jetstar passenger

In these turbulent times, not many people really know what's on the menu, or how to choose from it. Marek Korczynski and Ursula Ott suggest that a menu approach to society can be a fruitful interpretive approach in these consumerist times—particularly as a menu provides choice, but within limits (2006).

Depending on the largesse of the menu providers, you can't really have anything that's not on the list: the only choice is to go elsewhere. This can come as a relief, as choice can be overrated—at least, the social columnist Mia Freedman thinks so. She's had enough, at any rate (2008).

Barry Vaughan thinks that not fitting in with what's available has led to a more punitive society: we don't talk about class relations to describe and excoriate outsiders, but we demand more punishment for rule-breakers (2002). If you can have what you want as a consumer, then stepping out of line can be problematic, if you engage in antisocial activity, which can be cultural as well as criminal.

Payment and regulation of teachers seem to be the way to educational success, a kind of Foucauldian discipline—and-punish.

Some successful principals, however, say they're not in it for the money—there are other considerations (Munro 2009a, 2009b).

People need help to find strategies for coping with the way the world is, but they don't need false hopes from psychologists that they will be able to get it under control.

Hugh Mackay

Social researcher Hugh Mackay recently observed, to members of the Australian Psychological Society, that our uncertain times lead people to want to control their lives a lot more, and perhaps also the lives of others—how they should behave, for instance, notwithstanding the essentially messy nature of existence. He suggested that, paradoxically, positive psychology and associated ideas such as seeking 'happiness' may encourage unrealistic expectations of what life might be about; that it's not something to be wrestled to the ground and brought under control, but to be experienced (2008).

This can be a dilemma for the growing number of people who talk publicly about their need for closure after an unpleasant event or experience. Commenting on the natural resilience that seems to come with disasters such as the recent bushfires in Victoria, the mental health expert Beverly Raphael said that psychological recovery takes time:

Closure is not a good word. Some things will never be closed for these people, but they can go on and have a life even though for some that will now seem like an impossibility ... people cope in different ways. (Skelton 2009)

From a similar expertise base, Christopher Hall writes that ‘most of us never achieve closure in our grieving, even though we may appear to get on with our lives’. These current views contradict those of the 1940s which presumed that ‘grief can be resolved in four to six weeks’, and the ‘antiquated models ... from the late 1960s’ suggesting that “‘acceptance” of loss’ marked an end to grieving (2009).

These ideas resonate with my own limited experience of grief.

My wife says I'm disagreeable and I tell her I'm not, then realise I'm disagreeing with her. And yes, I start to doubt myself and think, maybe I am disagreeable and then next thing I know I'm disagreeing with myself.

Cameron Noakes

For Cameron Noakes, being disagreeable can be a conundrum (2008). In a society where public figures of any age run about wanting people not to be mean or to say unfriendly things, as, for instance, in feedback on abilities or performance.

Even before recent events, there had been an emphasis on things such as getting the right job or career, for which university study is one vehicle. Advertising campaigns for these institutions want you to attend for those sorts of reasons, not for anything related to knowledge or study or discourse which might turn out to be disagreeable, to some at least.

It's contentious whether some parents are actually interested in their children's education, or know what education entails.

In recounting his own observations and experience, Geoff Strong suggests that this idea should be challenged. This is not only for those who, as in his experience, were raised in a family without books and with a lack of encouragement to complete school. It's also for those who, perhaps consulting several menus, seek to purchase education as ‘another commodity you can buy along with the prestige car’ (2009).

To be a pleasant person, you would at least need to see the point of being a pleasant person.

Michael Leunig

Being disagreeable is something natural for thinking types, as harmony is not necessarily a priority, but feeling types can also be disagreeable on the basis of values that they consider to be right. So, like Michael Leunig, they'd have to see the point, or that others' points of view are naturally different.

For some, how we behave is important, often on another's judgement. Some people are uncomfortable with disagreement for conflict avoidance reasons, but others who might take a black-and-white perspective or like to make judgements on others' opinions may not want to be contradicted.

Sometimes people can be confused by the behaviour of others, because they think knowledge and application of particular ways of acting are general to all people, including those of other cultures, something problematic in itself. In a recent biographical review, the renowned scientist Paul Dirac's approach to social events met with consternation, when what was described seemed to be normal behaviour for a particular type of person: I could see something in it, anyway (Ferreira 2009).

Human nature often contradicts common sense.

Tessa Kendall

Personality type pioneer Isabel Myers considered that the hardest thing for anyone to do, whatever their type preferences, is to make good decisions. This involves examining facts and ideas and selecting the most robust in either category, before proceeding.

It doesn't take much reflection to observe that there have been a lot of uninformed decisions made for quite a while, and that many people in decision-making positions



Harmony is not necessarily a priority for thinking types

aren't really good at meeting Myers's criteria, whether encumbered by theories of the market, or what people are really like, or how people learn and develop.

None of these are easy to answer or simple to explain. Some look for simplicity, when the complexity of weather patterns, for instance, or even careers and life, doesn't really lend itself to the current outcome-based mode of thinking and deciding.

This might be relevant to Michael Sainsbury's observations on the ability of company board members to both survive and be well-remunerated while being less than competent (2008). Perhaps there aren't enough good decision-makers to go around, and no amount of training and development is going to change it much.

Any policy or idea that has reference to human activity comes with an implicit (sometimes explicit) view of what human beings are like, or what they optimally should be like.

Proponents of the superiority of market-driven forces in the economy, for instance, presume that individuals make rational (i.e. logical and objective) decisions, and seek to do so at all times. A hidden presumption is that those who participate in the market make better decisions than those in other fields (government, for instance), even in the current circumstances. Another presumption, as Ross Gittins pointed out recently (2008a; 2008b), is that economic models, generated on computer, are more 'real' than what people actually do.

This operates in other areas where models proliferate, including in type, when a type description or questionnaire printout is deemed superior to a person's life experience, rather than just being an indicator of what they might want to do and how they might wish to do it.

Mixed messages also come from successful business people now appearing as philanthropists. Bill Gates and his wife, Melinda, are involved in a number of worthy causes, handing out some of the money gathered as part of his spectacular success (Turner 2008). This is obviously a good thing to do, but it seems strikingly at variance with the activities of his company over the years,

both in its products and in dealings with competitors. I don't understand the kind of thinking behind this: surely it's possible to be successful without engaging in the brutalist tactics of Strategic Management 301.

Tony Wright mused recently about the notion of companies actually employing people (a cost, according to prevailing financial models) as part of their social obligations, rather than their profits (2009). An old way of thinking, perhaps, but worth consideration. Paul Thompson might agree with these sentiments, but he suggests that organisations aren't really set up this way and employers can't really meet their end of the bargain, which really should spark some rethinking of current arrangements and presuppositions (2003).

Sometimes decision-making—or, rather, decision-proclaiming—from business or government can appear incongruous. Part of the reason is the ascription of monetary value to any idea or policy, which is often essentially a way of saying 'no', or doing nothing. Sometimes decision-makers manage a public or private purse as if it's their own, rather than looking at broader issues about what might be required for a decent society.

In Melbourne, where I now live, current issues include water supply and public transport. A feature of the debate around these issues seems to be direct avoidance of the topic at hand, and either sticking to an agreed mantra, or denying the issue by saying something else.

One of those methods of communication is convincing people by marketing. This sort of distraction can involve things such as handing out bottles of water to train passengers as compensation for the hot, sweaty journey they're going to experience—or not, depending on cancellations. In the midst of buckling rails and customer dissatisfaction (whether or not they have received their free water), it's possible to have a political figure state, without irony, that Melbourne possesses the best public transport system in the world.

As the city's water reserves decline, the focus has been on management of water use by the public, rather than the uses of



Feeling types can be disagreeable on the basis of their values

business and other organisations. Targets are set and shorter showers encouraged. To help people limit their showers to four minutes, households received a small timer in the shape of an hourglass. This article, attachable to a shower wall, possesses blue sand (so you know it's about water). Statements at its top and bottom spruik 'Our Water' and 'Our Future'.

The presumption seems to be that people will respond by reading the slogans in a stimulus-response kind of way. Remarkably, people would have actually attended meetings to discuss and decide on this course of action. Perhaps they were working on 'raising awareness', an amorphous phrase wafting meaninglessly about in the breeze, with consequences and decisions unattached.

In the aftermath of a spectacular burst water main that remained uncapped for half a day, the water provider can muse that it takes a lot of time to contact everyone to tell them that their water is going to be shut off. And the accountable minister can freely state, against the visible evidence, that the system works well, and that, in a city with strict water restrictions, little water was lost anyway, notwithstanding locals filling rubbish bins and other receptacles to take advantage of the situation.

My own local council recently put out a message that maintaining nature strips was important, notwithstanding current water restrictions, and the previous 10 weeks or so being essentially rainless.

It's too easy to dismiss this as spin, a method designed to stultify discussion and avoid action. The question is why there is a virtue in apparently defending an unmanageable status quo, and what people are going to do about it.

Just as voting is compulsory, kicking back on Australia Day seems to be a matter of national obligation.

Nick Bryant

Something of this can be seen in the current proliferation of Australian flags. In Perth recently I saw flags attached to cars, and

fluttering in their slipstreams. This in a place which never voted for Federation, and which attempted to secede from the Commonwealth of Australia in 1931.

Vin Maskell has a flag in his sight near his home, as I do, and wonders what it means (2009). A particular perspective might identify such acts as a defence mechanism, American influence through movies and news media, or archetypal expression. In a sensation-oriented culture like pragmatic Australia, our myths are first events, like Gallipoli, which are then apotheosised to become legend, as distinct from fact, and therefore undiscussable without emotion.

One of the interesting things about discussing culture is that, in the desire to be succinct, generalisations are made that don't fit large proportions of society whose lives are organised differently. It's no accident that in elections the winners get a little more than 50% of the vote.

Nick Bryant inadvertently picks this out in observing the fragmentary nature of Australian society (2009), probably divided between rule-makers and rule-breakers. Mex Cooper reports on a council which has decided to clear a local beach of shells, as they might cut people's bare feet (2008). The notion that this might occur on any beach was dismissed. The risk was too much, apparently.

The exuberance and ignorance of crowd members at a patriotic event like a one-day international cricket match has Brian Dwyer wondering about safety and quiet enjoyment, as well as the consumer messages being continuously presented via loudspeaker and scoreboard (2009).

'Australia' can depend on where you are: sometimes a few kilometres is sufficient to be in another world. The Australian-born writer Melanie La'Brooy reflects on her experience of other Australians asking where she's from and not taking 'Sydney' as sufficient. My local shopping centre in outer Melbourne is patronised by people of many cultural backgrounds, particularly more recent arrivals from India and Africa. Several Muslim women are often gathered in their traditional garb, somewhat like the nuns who taught me at school, but more colourfully dressed.



'Australia' depends on where you are

As a person who grew up in an area with a large immigrant population, I find these scenes congenial, but others don't seem to agree. In a similar centre in another outer suburb not all that far away, I encountered a totally different environment, of European Australians. These different experiences shape people's decisions—much as the television and videos they watch and the things they read (or don't read).

Something of this dilemma is expressed in public policy and other expressions of management. People who require government assistance at some time in their lives, for whatever reason, have to go through regulatory frameworks which seek to standardise individual experience and personal needs in a non-personal way.

Whilst there are obvious administrative benefits to this process, it's not all that clear that the psychological and social needs of many are addressed, no matter the intention. After the recent Victorian bushfire tragedy, Centrelink's assistance was hamstrung by identification requirements, expressed both in the field and in an automatically-generated letter sent to those affected.

C G Jung would have found these events synchronistic, and perhaps indicative of the denial of negative aspects of policy and procedures. While such insensitivities would have been the experience of Centrelink clients over the years, including my own, issues of personal need and lack of individual power leave these events hidden. Now they are publicly exposed, to the unfortunate embarrassment of officials genuinely wanting to help.

They say it's no good for you ...

What do they know?

Do they love you?

Not the way that I do.

Walter Becker

So, who do people listen to for advice, or take notice of what they say and do? Walter Becker sardonically observes that the success of healthy eating is circumscribed by

considerations other than expert or other advice. Mum or Dad know better.

On a radio program about the US elections, the singer Chris Isaak suggested we should not listen to him on the topic, for what he thought were obvious reasons—one of which was that the event didn't really have much to do with policy, but was essentially a popularity contest (Burns 2008).

Gwyneth Paltrow, however, wants you to listen to her Goop, gushing over her web site with improbable advice on detoxing yourself and other things of moment, to her at any rate. Others are less enthusiastic (Vuk 2009; Freeman 2009). The feminist psychotherapist Susie Orbach wonders why people are hating their bodies: perhaps they are listening to someone else, or following the unconscious trend, like tattooing and Botox (2009).

One of the curiosities of the American election campaign was the appearance of Sarah Palin, who galvanised and polarised public opinion. The suggestion that she's not going away emphasises Isaak's point (Allen-Mills 2009). In another way, so did the suggestion that many women from the Democratic side spoke about voting for Palin simply because she was female. It's unlikely that Republican women would have reciprocated for Hillary Clinton, had she secured the nomination (Brians 2005; Sanbonmatsu and Dolan 2008).

Certainly, there are a number of examples of people with minimal competence in US presidential elections over recent decades, some successful in attaining office. For me, Palin appeared startlingly incompetent on a number of grounds, but I didn't think that was all that unusual for vice-presidential candidates in particular. Guy Rundle has some entertaining and incisive views on the campaign itself (2008).

Notwithstanding the importance of religious attachment in US politics, the foreign editor of *The Australian*, Greg Sheridan, thinks Palin was unfairly pilloried for her religious beliefs. Partly this was because he'd been to a Catholic Pentecostal event (really quite a different set of beliefs to Palin's) and they seemed to be nice people, a somewhat ingenuous approach.



Palin polarised public opinion

In the end, people listen to or read what's congenial. But presumptions of the quality of cognitive and other processes being generally spread around, or that everyone is resilient, or attends the supermarket in generally the same way, or wants the same educational outcomes or water supply, need to be rethought.

Maybe some good decisions need to follow as well. ❖

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I would like to remember the life of Catherine Peerman who, with her husband Steve Hardy, attended one of my MBTI accreditation courses and showed an intellect and vitality that will be missed.

Also Max Teichmann of Monash University: someone I never met, but whose political views and analysis I read with interest and learning in my youth.

Peter Geyer



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