

# To the bush and back to business



Glenn Martin

**Glenn Martin (1950 - )** grew up in Sydney, Australia. He lived in the hills on the far north coast of New South Wales for twenty years before coming back to Sydney. He is a writer on management, training and business ethics. He has been a manager of organisations in the community sector, a high school teacher, psychiatric nurse, community worker, social researcher, tutor in business ethics, and editor of professional publications. His other books include:

*Human Values and Ethics in the Workplace*

*The Little Book of Ethics*

*The Ten Thousand Things: A story of the lived  
experience of the I Ching*

*Sustenance*

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# Author's Foreword

I know authors don't have to do this, and maybe some readers would prefer I didn't. Who wants to read an author's foreword? Just get on with the story. Well, there's the issue of precedent for a start. I wrote an author's foreword for *The Ten Thousand Things* and for *Sustenance*. A precedent has been set.

And besides, when you read the book you might wonder how it was written. It was in fact written under the same constraint as the two books mentioned, that is, as a project to write a book of at least 50,000 words in one month – National Novel Writing Month, or NanoWrimo. That requirement does to writers what they generally have a strong wish to avoid – it demands that they perform on the spot. With this goal and time frame, there is no time for second thoughts or regrets; you wrote what you wrote today and now you have to figure out what to say next. And don't think about it for too long. The only option is to keep going, and I did, day upon day.

The book was a surprise to me. In my two earlier books, a definite story announced itself to me quite early on: I knew that that was the story I had to tell. This time, a “neat”, “historical” event did not appear; I just had to keep digging. It was the theme that took centre stage. I realised after a while that I was writing about why I left the city as a young man – what drove me, and what eventuated.

Is this book a memoir? At one point within, I reject the idea, and I stand by my reasons. But then, when I applied for an ISBN, I had to nominate a category, and I had to relent. It seemed to be the closest fitting category. Hence, you will see that the subject of the book is “Martin, Glenn”. But that is not so. I am just the vehicle.

The story is the thing, and I haven't told this story before. It is when I have to write that I think most deeply. Writing it forced me to grapple with things that had just sat comfortably (or uncomfortably) below the surface for a long time.

I hadn't planned to take an archaeological approach. That happened because in writing about the time when I left the city, phrases of poems I had written at that time started to come back to me, and I remembered that I had a whole boxful of these poems and stories. Of course, taking the lid off the box was a matter of some trepidation. It might all be stomach-churning rubbish, all angst and naivety. And I worried about including poetry in a prose book; I think it's generally problematic to try and put those two kinds of sensibilities together.

But I feel that I have accommodated myself appropriately. I think the stories and poems belong here. I'm not claiming greatness for them, but nor am I apologising for them. They are voices that were part of my journey, they are expressions of how it was at certain points along the way. And I don't keep journals, so I wasn't striving for historical (place, time, people) accuracy. In a way I'm glad. The poems and stories are truer.

I came back to the city, as the book title indicates, and here I am, in some kind of relationship to the business world. The core of the book for me, that came as a realisation when I had finished writing, was that there is a continuity and cohesiveness about my life that I (almost) didn't expect. In some ways I was thinking that I had started in one place, and gone here and there, and happened to come back to the same city, but there

was really little to tie it together except loss and failure.

Well, there is indeed loss and failure, but my ideals and passions seem (to me) remarkably persistent and resilient. I trust you will see it too. Enjoy.

Glenn Martin

Sydney, May 2012

# 1

I have come to a stop. And things have conspired to make me stop. Jobs have been coming my way with less frequency, and there is no longer anyone living with me. In fact, I worked out last night that this is the first time I have been living alone in over twenty years. It is not alarming, it is not fearful, it is not empty. I have a feeling of spaciousness. I remind myself at times during the day. Spaciousness.

Of course there are still obligations. There are still some jobs to do, there is still maintenance, there are still minor interests. There is still noise. But in this new space things are slower, and I wonder about my ambitions. I would not have thought of myself as a person who harboured ambitions, and yet I think there are such boats in my harbour. And if so, I have not been greatly successful. I have had no great career, I have not accumulated honours, fame or funds. I do not even have a cohort of professional friends, for I have moved from industry to industry. Instead of peaking, I seem to have petered out.

And I baulk at saying even this, because it veers in the direction of self-pity, which is a ferocious monster that can devour a person. It is a Wang demon whose blood runs black and who sucks you into the ground. I know there is no need to be too disparaging of my past; there are many respectable achievements strewn around in it, things done well, some victories. It's just that it all falls away, and here I am still.

I have been told to enjoy myself. To remember that. I've earned it (they say). And a friend sent me a quote the



other day, from the poet, Rumi: “You have woken up late, lost and perplexed. But don't rush to your books looking for knowledge. Pick up the flute instead and let your heart play.” I agree. I usually do agree with Rumi. But I would contend that I do enjoy the things I do. It's just that some of the things I do would not look like enjoyment to other people.

I've just spent a week of long days and long nights writing a paper on ethics. It was 20,000 words and involved a lot of research – immersion in dozens of writers' thoughts and works, as well as dredging up memories of books I've read over a span of forty years. You have to follow the thread of a thought, and then things pop up. So it happened that, near the end, it was appropriate to call upon Theodore Roszak, from a book published in 1972 called *The Making of a Counter Culture*. I found the book on my shelves with remarkable rapidity, and the passage I wanted, with a bookmark at the page and the exact words I wanted highlighted.

I'm just saying, satisfaction is a personal thing. King Wen says that sometimes you should be satisfied to stay at home, to stay within your court with the gate firmly closed. Do not scatter yourself about in idle chatter with this one and that one, agitated. Do not strive to be prominent. At one point he says the flying bird came and left him a message, and the message was, it is not appropriate for you to soar. Remember the little; that makes you sincere and trustworthy.

I think, is this all a bit “quietist”? Are our lives meant to be menial? Should I forego any vestige of wanting? But I recall, there was a visit recently, so unusual that I took a photo of it. It was a visit by four birds. Not one, but four. Four black cockatoos with

red tails came and sat in my favourite tree in my yard. Right here in the suburbs. They made their raucous sound as they flew in – that’s how you know you are getting a visit. I came out to see if it was really black cockatoos. They used to come to where I lived before, in the country, in a forested valley near a creek. They would come when the weather was on the turn, and rain was on the way. They would fly in great arcs about the trees, in small groups, and land near the house, a great circus of noise, town criers screeching, “Wake up, wake up. Sumptuous weather approaching.”

When the black cockatoos sat in my favourite tree, they paused. The message was just the silence, as if to say: it’s okay to stop. Indeed, necessary, if you like. I wasn’t quite sure what the message was at the time. Black cockatoos are so striking that you always think there is great portent in their appearance. But for some mornings after that I sat just outside the door of my study for a while, with my cup of hot green tea, and looked at the sky. You could say it was “open eyes meditation”. If you like.

What do I get from sky? This: for all my activity, desire and restlessness, it remains blue and deep. It has its own restless spirit too, as clouds come and go, but it is able to accommodate them. The sky is the great house that accommodates whatever comes. I enjoy clouds, but I love the constancy of sky.

So I deal with small affairs, content. Frugality is better than excess. After bliss there are cups of tea, and indeed, abundance.

## 2

Outside the gate, business goes on. They say it is a world where good people do bad things. But supposing this were the case, I don't see any general spirit of willingness to look into this unfortunate state of affairs. Who is asking, how can we get these supposedly good people to actually do good things? It always seems rather late when we recognise that something is a bad thing. Up until then we keep thinking the thing is good, or at least acceptable, or widespread, or inevitable. We keep lurching towards our unseemly ends.

I say, if you take something to its logical conclusion you've taken it too far. That's the trouble with logic. So here we are, in this society full of stuff, and of course it's fun, but have we become attached to the race, and don't know how to stop? How many clothes are enough? How big does your house need to be? How often do you need to replace your kitchen or your car?

There is a madness about all this. We have created this pattern over a period of two hundred years, and asked Adam Smith to bless it. Produce, buy, consume, replace, ad infinitum. Although, it now appears, there may not be an ad infinitum. This whole pattern is unsustainable, but we don't know what a sustainable world would look like, economically, socially or, most importantly, in terms of lifestyle. That's why I ended up in the bush forty years ago. There were a number of people who precipitated that recourse, and Theodore Roszak was one of them.



A young man who should have found a corporate ladder somewhere and climbed up it, turns his back instead and goes off into the bush. Years later he comes back to the city that he left. In this book he rakes over the ground: the search for a viable livelihood living close to the earth, the search for an alternative community. He asks himself, was the questing anything more than loss and failure? What do those young-man dreams look like now? And what does business look like?

This is personal archaeology, not a work of tidy history. The only records he has to call upon are a stack of papers, folders and exercise books in a box. We have to glean the history from what comes out of the box – poems, short stories and notes on scraps of paper that ignite memories. This is archaeology that brings us face to face with ideals and desire, loss and hard circumstance, and passions that endure.

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