

A landscape photograph of a mountain range with a rainbow in a cloudy sky. The sky is filled with soft, grey clouds, and a vibrant rainbow arches across the center. The mountains in the foreground are covered in dense green forest, with some peaks visible in the distance under a hazy sky.

# Sustenance

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 20 years before coming back to Sydney. He works as a writer and instructional designer on management, training and ethics. He has been a school teacher, psychiatric nurse, community worker, social researcher, tutor in business ethics, editor and manager of organisations in the community sector. He has written several other books, including two books on ethics: *Human Values and Ethics in the Workplace* and *The Little Book of Ethics*. His first novel was *The Ten Thousand Things: A story of the lived experience of the I Ching*.

See Glenn's website at [www.glenmartin.com.au](http://www.glenmartin.com.au)

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By Glenn Martin

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Websites: [www.glennmartin.com.au](http://www.glennmartin.com.au)  
[www.ethics.andvalues.com.au](http://www.ethics.andvalues.com.au)

Contact: [glenn@glennmartin.com.au](mailto:glenn@glennmartin.com.au)

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I am not the master of the universe  
but I come from bliss  
and that way I serve all-that-is.

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## Author's Foreword

I started this book as a NanoWrimo (National Novel Writing Month) exercise – writing a novel of at least 50,000 words in one month, the thirty days of November. I didn't make the 50,000 words within the time, and I hadn't finished the story. Nevertheless, I wrote on most days, and the story was taking shape, so I kept going. The story was in my head and I had to draw it out and finish it.

I finished on 22<sup>nd</sup> December 2010, at around 77,500 words, about 20,000 words longer than *The Ten Thousand Things* which I had written twelve months earlier. The statistics are just for our amusement, of course. The real significance of writing a story in a defined time frame is that as a writer you live with the story in your head and there is an urgency to resolve it. I'd rather do this than agonise over a story for months or years.

Is there any significance in the length? Well, fifty to seventy thousand words seems to work for many readers. It's long enough to enable immersion, but not so long that you have to put the rest of your life on hold while you finish it, or that you leave it unfinished.

There is the question of the novel's relationship to fact. In *The Ten Thousand Things* I was engaged with what happened in a particular period of my life, and the central story carries an essential relationship with what happened. I obscured some facts and compressed others for the sake of the coherence of the story and to allow it to stand as a novel rather than be scrutinised as history.

In *Sustenance* I have again started with history; central elements of the story align with reality. Yet I have felt licence this time to be more liberal. That wasn't so much because I wanted to diverge from history, it was because when the situation and the characters started flowing out onto the page, they often said and did things that I did not expect, and then I had to accommodate that. It's funny how people can change

over time, or more accurately, my perception of them and their possibilities has evolved.

In terms of chronology, the main story here predates *The Ten Thousand Things* by a couple of years.

Why do I care that my stories have a connection to history? Why do I disavow the generic disclaimer, which I imagine in many novels is gratuitous anyway, that everything within the pages of the said book is completely fictional, and bears no relation to any real circumstances or anyone living or dead?

It is because there is a debate that goes on among managers in organisations, and among management educators, about the relevance of fiction to the personal development of managers. One view is that reading fiction is important because it sensitises managers to the human element in the workplace (that is, it reminds them that they are dealing with real people).

Managers tend to be very good at dealing with logistics and the coordination of things. Where they fall down is when they have to consider that people are more than logistical widgets that fill slots and fulfil assigned functions. The reality is that people think in idiosyncratic ways and they have values and emotional needs that motivate them. Working with people effectively requires an understanding of human needs, and indeed, it requires empathy and even what we have to call, boldly, love.

The argument goes that reading fiction helps the manager to develop an awareness of the human aspect of the managerial role. But, goes the opposing argument, why should a manager spend his or her time reading a story that someone has just made up? If it's fiction, then it's just fantasy, a form of escapism. The story might end nicely (or not), and seem to have a moral, but someone just invented that story and that ending. The whole point of management is to learn how to deal with what's real.

So I want to say that, in essence, this story “really happened”. I have massaged the facts about people and circumstances to create sufficient distance from any particular people and situations that have played a part in my personal history, but in terms of how people can behave in the workplace and in life, this story is an accurate reflection.

A word about the I Ching. I introduced the I Ching in *The Ten Thousand Things* as a personal guide for living and for operating as a leader. The I Ching again plays its part in *Sustenance*. I make no apology to those who think this may be another form of superstition raising its ugly head, just when we thought science and rationality had thankfully triumphed.

All I would say here is, when you are a manager in the midst of a complex chain of human events and you have to make a decision, and the decision is not just a question of logistics but a question that defines who you are as a human, science will not help you, and nor is that its task. You need the wisdom of the ages, and for that you must tune into the spirits of wonder, morality, power and creativity.

There is one other comment I would make. You may wonder whether the novel is going to be weighed down by didacticism. Is the author so intent on making an educational point that the story is laboured and pretentious? I think not. The funny thing is, once you start writing, you have to let go of the need to preach. There is a story, and you just have to tell the story and hope, in retrospect, that the reader will find some value in it.

So. Enjoy.

## Chapter 1: The great sadness

When Janice told me she didn't want to see me anymore, I left her apartment and started walking down the stairs. Then there didn't seem to be any reason to keep walking, so I sat down, there on the stairs. The wall in front of me was glass, facing west, and it was afternoon. The sun streamed through and bathed me.

This wasn't the beginning of the great sadness. It happened because I was in the midst of the great sadness, a little boat bobbing in the ocean, and no land in sight.

The Tao says "what you gain is more trouble than what you lose; sustain your connection to the source"<sup>1</sup>. What I had to lose was the sadness, and that went way back. Of course, it seemed to be necessary to bang my head against a brick wall for a while. I loved Janice in that desperate way that completely disregards reality, like the fact that should have been obvious to me, that she was largely indifferent to me. She kind of just wanted a boyfriend, just to see what it was like to have a boyfriend for a while.

My desperate love spawned poems and private heart-rending. It was love like throwing yourself off a cliff, expecting gravity to suspend its implacability and transform the moment into bliss. In the end, there was nothing there but falling. In retrospect I could be grateful that she said it: "I don't want to see you anymore". If she'd thought differently, I could have been hanging at the end of her string forever in the hope of an impossibility.

Better to sit so empty on her stair that afternoon. And in any case, Janice wasn't the source of the sadness. The sadness in which I was immersed was greater, deeper. The futile love was just a skirmish in its greater war, a playground where it could exercise its belligerent qualities. I knew it but I still ached for the dream of that love for Janice. I had thought that it would complete me, that there was an "us" that would make life wonderful.

These things were entangled with each other. I would have liked to have sorted it out before I had to go, but I figured I had to move off the stairs soon, and I was good at doing what I figured I had to do, so I got up and walked down the stairs. I got on my motorbike and rode away, wanting to shake off the weight by going somewhere.

Where did I go? I just went home, to my room. I avoided the desolation of bars, of small talk, repetitive stories, coarse laughter and cheap opinions. I didn't need company like that. I didn't need company. I was conscious of the tension between moving and standing still. Should I keep moving – running, working, talking, immersing myself in projects, making a social contribution, keeping busy? Or should I just stop? Would it be fatal to stop? Or self-indulgent? Or would stopping be the only thing that was important?

I realised that you can do both, in one way. It's perfectly possible to stop internally while you keep up outward activity. You can work, interact socially, study and even engage in recreational pursuits while you keep some part of you frozen. I did that. I just boarded up the house, as it were, and allowed the neighbourhood to carry on around it. I mowed the metaphorical lawn and cleared the metaphorical letters from the metaphorical letter box, without venturing any more inside the house.

Frozen. But all the time bobbing on this ocean. Wanting to believe my heart was broken by a girl. Well, large parts of me wanting to believe my heart was broken by a girl. The other parts saying, quietly, like water lapping at the side of the boat, "There's more to it than this. You know that. What is it?" I listened to the water lapping, over and over.

## Chapter 2: Realising needs

*“When there is needing, scrambling for food, contention will arise.”<sup>2</sup>*

Janice was a need. Not personally. That was the whole point. I needed her in some non-rational, hungry way. Sure, there were aspects of her that were attractive. But my need was blind, it wasn't a question of weighing up the merit of certain attractive aspects, whether that meant eyes, hair, her body, financial status, sense of humour or intelligence. It was a need for something that she represented an opportunity for.

Was it the idea of a socially acceptable partner, with whom I could fulfil all those societal dreams – wife, mother of my children, my partner at gatherings of work colleagues, the gaiety of repartee among a group of age-aligned couples at a social occasion at one of our homes? Someone who made herself available to share the adventure of the bodies of man and woman?

Now there was the temptation to hate her, but I knew that would be stupid. I was at least wise enough to know she was just the bogie, like a hat on a stick in trench warfare. The hat goes up out of the trench, and the enemy fires at it. The hat just proves there are guns in the neighbourhood. I was needy; I was scrambling for food, and the contentions were waging war in my head.

I grasped the sadness. I saw it went beyond Janice, and came before her. Whether we became partners or not, it would have made no difference. I was ensconced in my little boat, bobbing. Once I went fishing with my step-father. It was a day trip in a 30-foot sailing boat with a group of fishermen. I wasn't a fisherman. My step-father was, and I was spending a day with him. He thought I might like to fish.

As it turned out, it was a rough day on the bay, and the boat heaved and swayed all day, about a metre up and down. I went up and down with it, and I didn't enjoy the feeling. It turned me green and made my stomach roll. I didn't throw up, but I felt like it all day. On the other

hand, I caught three respectable fish, and my step-father caught none. And he wasn't happy about that at all. I did enjoy the irony.

I thought about seasickness, and I decided not to feel seasick in my little boat. I thought, even when I was seasick I didn't need to scramble for food. So I will go up and down as the waves do, and be at peace with that.

I was working, teaching at high schools around the city. It was different to being based at one school, and it gave me some detachment from my feelings of futility about being a teacher. But was that also related to the great sadness? Or was it based on a perfectly reasonable conclusion that the school system was misdirected and failed young people both emotionally and intellectually? I wasn't sure.

Weeks went by. It's interesting that even when you try to keep things frozen, they keep evolving. You still encounter things that are not like yesterday, days that bring new information, and new people, into your life. I read stories in a newspaper about people who had moved to the country and were forming communities.

It was a scary thought, moving away from the city and leaving all its connections behind. You can't really "half-move". If you really move away, it's too far for you to keep a foot in both camps. You have to move both feet, all of you, and then you are cut off. The old world is going to disappear. And will you be in a good place? How could you know beforehand?

Sometimes you need guidance. And you can't be too rigorous about the criteria for guidance, because how can you judge its accuracy? You just have to think, maybe I'm a fool, but where is being sensible and asking for proof getting me? It will only ever get you into a deeper rut of socially conventional answers. I guess the sub-text of that thought is that a worthwhile life involves finding how to find and fulfil your uniqueness. Fair enough.

The rules for guidance:

1. It has to be around me, meaning it has to be available. No journeys for me halfway around the planet to some unfamiliar culture. If the universe has a voice, it can be heard where I am.
2. It has to make sense in terms of my understanding of the world. It can be challenging, but it will not simply be a negation of all I know. Not for me the rejection of all thinking in exchange for a daily routine of chanting or any other particular practice.
3. It has to be ethical, on my current understanding of ethics.

The rules might seem too rigorous for some. Some might argue that I am not opening myself enough to all the possibilities, that I am being too “safe”. Or even that I am setting rules for God. (I am allowing the word “God” here. I’m sure the issue will arise again later.) Well, I would simply reply, this God made me, like this, the way I am. And my guidance will be true. I assert this.

### **Chapter 3: An afternoon in the park**

On the weekend I went to the park in the city where the proselytisers congregate. It doesn’t happen anymore. Perhaps there is too much television, or internet, or mobile phones. Perhaps people are philosophically in ennui, or too committed to hedonism or hubris. In those days there was a market for ideas, a free market on Sundays where loud people and crazies would gather and shout their brand of salvation to the crowds. There was jostling for attention and a zeal that contrasted with the bland routines of weekdays.

I often went there, to gauge the mood of things generally, and to test my resilience. Perhaps there were points of view that would shake mine up, perhaps there were things I had not thought about. Generally I came home sobered by the madness of the many. Occasionally I came home illuminated by a fresh perspective, or touched by a loving soul.



This day, among the large throng, on a sun-filled, green-grassy afternoon, amid the amusing, the outrageous and the anguished presenters, I saw an old man, Chinese, with a small table and a small noticeboard, not attracting much of an audience. I didn't think I would be assailed by him, and I wondered what he might have to offer. His hand-drawn sign said "I Ching readings".

I read the text of his noticeboard. It was all home-produced – neat hand-writing, odd symbols and Chinese ideographs. He let me read, not interrupting, just waiting. "So," I said eventually, "what's the I Ching?" And he chuckled.

"The I Ching," he said, "is very old. It originated about five thousand years ago, and sages like King Wen, the Duke of Zhou and Confucius added to its writings. It is a source of wisdom and guidance which is still used by people today. The I Ching says everything is in constant change. Everything is constantly becoming and disintegrating too. How do you live a good life and do right in a world like this?"

"That's a good question," I said. "But how could something so old, from another culture, be of any use today?"

"The I Ching is universal," he replied. "It is Chinese but also it is not Chinese. It is universal." And his face was as open as his statement – no push, no evangelising, seeking nothing from me. Which meant I was not about to become a prisoner. I could play here awhile if I chose.

"What can you tell me about the I Ching?" I asked. I was interested, although I didn't want to become one of those converts to another culture, people who find Buddhism or Hinduism, Islam, vegetarianism or whatever, and reject all of the culture they have grown up with. That seemed too much to me like the child who gets a new toy and then forgets all the toys they already have.

Maybe the new toy is exciting, and maybe some of the old toys only deserved a certain amount of attention and had exhausted their interestingness. But I have some sympathy for the velveteen rabbit

who never did anything wrong and who was ignored when something that seemed to be better came along. The novelty of the new.

Whatever the old man had to say, I would weigh it up and test it against the value of what I already thought, the ideas I had evolved through reading, experience and reflection over the years I had lived. I wasn't about to jump aboard some crazy new wagon and ride off with manufactured joy.

The old man said again, "Everything is always changing. But," he added, "we can live well in the midst of this change, and live from a place of centredness and strength. The I Ching helps us to be aware, and to make good decisions."

"But what do you believe?" I asked. Beliefs were important to me. I had been brought up in a church, and beliefs were the stock in trade. They were what differentiated your church from other churches, which was important, otherwise the existence of other churches didn't make sense. These beliefs were so clear to the church where I grew up that they were written down and followed a formula. There were fearful consequences if one deviated from the formula – "Hell", although during the time I was growing up there was increasing discomfort in the church about discussing this aspect, and it was left somewhat vague.

The old man did a lot of chuckling. When I asked him what he believed he chuckled again, like the Dalai Lama does. I didn't think my question was so funny. It was fundamental, wasn't it? Beliefs, like knowledge, are the foundation for how we live, they are what we base our lives on. Instead of telling me his beliefs, he asked me a question: "What's the biggest question on your mind at the moment?"

I thought this could be a trick, like the evangelists who approach you by telling you how dreadful the world is and how terrible society is, as a way of softening the ground for the answer they've come to offer you. It was also rather personal, to ask a stranger a question like that. But

then again, he was a stranger, so what did I have to lose? A stranger was, maybe, the perfect kind of person to talk to about deep things. I could walk away without strings attached, and I could compartmentalise the conversation if it didn't go so well.

I looked away to the crowds in the distance. There was a large crowd around one speaker, one who drew laughter and good-humoured heckling, and small throngs around other speakers strewn around the park. People were sitting on the grass in the sun, just enjoying the afternoon, in singles, couples, families, groups. The trees are all mature in this park, they provide a solid and benign space for people to be. Here you can take time rather than spend it.

I had come here with my question, and the old man had called me on that. He wasn't buying into a debate about beliefs. Which was odd, considering he said that the I Ching was based on an old book, or writings, and in the belief system I'd grown up with, the Bible was the source of all arguments about what beliefs were correct. Why wasn't he pitting his old book against the Bible?

But the message I got was deeper. What he was saying was that we could have a debate all afternoon about our respective beliefs, and he could quote chapter and verse, and I could quote chapter and verse, and in the end, the most important question was not going to be answered. I would walk away with a set of arguments to test against someone else's. I could go to libraries and bookshops for the next six months and find books so I could garner new arguments, modify my belief structure, and end up with a more robust cognitive framework.

And I would not be one step closer to addressing the questions that really mattered to me. How should I regard my current situation? What should I do next?

So, without trying to explain myself at all, I just said, "I want to know what I should do next?"

I wasn't asking him to tell me what to do next, and if I hoped for anything from him, I merely hoped that he would understand that.

"Exactly," he said. "So, would you like to explore that a little?"

"A little?" I thought. That's amusing. It was a gentle offer.

By this time a few people had come around. One couple were reading the notice board, one or two others were listening to us, the old Chinese man and me. I sensed them, I knew there were witnesses now. If I made a fool of myself there were people watching. I banished that thought. It was a thought that came from ego. Well, it was one of two thoughts – the ego always has a two-way bet. The first thought is the fear of embarrassment, and the second thought is the temptation of pride, showing off.

If I was to openly talk about the biggest question, I had to beware of the demons of fear and pride. I was in danger of thinking that I was not good enough, and on the other hand, of thinking myself too good.

"I don't know anything about the I Ching," I said. "How would I understand what you say?" I wasn't contending with him, I was asking for his assurance.

"The I Ching is universal," he said again. "There are sixty-four hexagrams, each of which has an image and a reading associated with it. No matter what your situation, one of those hexagrams will illuminate your situation. Sometimes your situation is in flux, and there will be moving lines in the hexagram, and then it will bring up a second hexagram. It means that your situation is already changing.

"What you do with the reading is up to you. You can find guidance in the words and images. You can redirect your life and become all that you can be.

"It may not make your life easier. But it is better to know oneself in the midst of trouble than to be ignorant in the midst of pleasure."

## Sustenance

Patrick begins under a cloud of gloom, rejected by his girlfriend and unsure of his occupation. But an encounter with an old Chinese man gives him a message of hope – his fate is his to create if he is willing to let go of things as they are. So he begins again elsewhere, finding a job working with unemployed youth. But the simple search for sustenance can lead into vexing terrain. How will he relate to the sadness, anger and disillusionment of the young people? How will he respond to the sexuality of a co-worker? And how will he deal with the people on the management committee – the self-serving, the brutal, the scheming and the inept?

The gift the old man gave him, the I Ching, stands by him as he strives to establish peace and purpose in his work, and find a woman who will love him. Amid the chaos, he learns:

*I am not the master of the universe  
but I come from bliss  
and that way I serve all-that-is.*



Glenn Martin is a writer on business ethics, leadership, training and development, and human resources, with over a decade of published work in Australian and international professional publications. *Sustenance* is his second novel. His first novel is *The Ten Thousand Things*.

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