

## *From the Kitchen*

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Making sense of the world can be difficult. We attempt it through our senses, tempered by our mind. What the mind does with all this input depends to a large extent on its programming through culture, education, parenting, race, peer influence, the environment and the media.

There are mundane examples. I see a chair and ‘know’ it as something I can sit on or, to reach a high shelf, stand on. Someone in a remote part of Papua New Guinea may see a chair for the first time and will have to use imagination to decide what it could be useful for. As a more weighty example: I will walk through a forest and be transported by its beauty and peacefulness; a timber worker may walk through the same forest and see it as super feet of timber and think about the best way to harvest it; an environmentalist may be looking for evidence of members of threatened species and thinking about how to save them. All of this can take place side by side in a pluralist, relatively liberal society like Australia, and we can debate these various views openly.

There are many parts of the world where views of that world are dictated by the government. For instance, in Israel schools are required to use text books that teach the formation of the State in 1948 from an Israeli / Jewish / Zionist point of view, with the Palestinian / Arab point of view denied. This in a country where some 20% of the citizens are Arab / Palestinian. There are many examples in many countries of certain views being illegitimate, even illegal, stifling debate and fostering generations of people with narrow, fixed views about the world.

Of course, in any country there will be groups of people, each with their own set of fixed ideas (for instance the creationists in the USA and the revisionary historians in Australia). The difference is that debate can and does occur. We all have our favourite ideas but, hopefully, most of us are open to being persuaded that we should consider changing them.

Even in a ‘free’ society as we have in Australia, we suffer from limited views which are continually challenged as new information comes forward and novel ways of thinking evolve. We are constantly confronted with opportunities to change our beliefs about the world, which for me, makes the world an interesting and exciting place. For some, it makes the world a scary place because, for them, having their beliefs challenged is a frightening experience.

Fixed ways of thinking can survive for a long time, with the result that new ideas struggle for recognition. An example is the research done by Barry Marshall and Robin Warren in Perth, which led them to the conclusion that a bacterium, *Helicobacter pylori*, could cause stomach ulcers. They suffered the fate of Galileo – being ‘excommunicated’. In Marshall’s and Warren’s case, the excommunication was from the medical community, which for years treated them as nut-cases. They almost lost their jobs at the university. Some twenty-three

years later (in 2005) they were awarded the Nobel Prize in Physiology and Medicine for their groundbreaking work. Now the role of *H. pylori* is accepted as mainstream and Marshall and Warren are fêted by their colleagues. I have heard this phenomenon expressed as, “progress in medicine marches funeral by funeral”. This may be true for progress in any field.

It is taking a long time for the idea to become accepted widely that humans may be ruining the planet to the extent that it could become uninhabitable. I am not just talking about climate change. It is difficult to know what is so in this area, because of the competing interests, including those with financial investments in the status quo and those arguing for a wider view of the situation who counsel us to err on the side of safety.

There is a constant danger, in every country, of governments pushing some beliefs and discouraging, even outlawing, others. This is almost always done in order to protect vested interests and to “preserve our way of life”. In Australia we have had government-led beliefs about Aborigines (leading to their children being removed), about Asians (leading to the ‘White Australia Policy’) and, currently, about asylum seekers. ‘Facts’ are not important in developing a fixed idea.

No matter what our cultural and ethnic upbringing, our education or our field of endeavour, we have a duty to question what we are told, to test its veracity and debate its wisdom.