



# THINKING FOR OURSELVES

**My friend, Jane, made her famous lasagne for dinner last week. It's rich and delicious, with the layers of fresh pasta, beef simmered with tomatoes and oregano and a bechamel sauce to die for.**

'This old recipe?' she said, 'I've been making it for so many years; I can do it with my eyes closed!'

Certainty does that. When we know something so well, there is no need to question what we're doing or where we're going. You've probably experienced it driving, arriving home without remembering turning the last three corners. The directions are so imprinted on your brain that you're running on autopilot. That's exactly why road accident researchers tell us that the five kilometres before home are the most dangerous part of the journey. 'I wasn't thinking,' is your excuse when a mishap occurs, but it's not quite accurate. You were thinking, just that it was about everything except what you most needed to.

Life's like that. Our middle years, full of career and home and family are so busy, busy, busy, that autopilot feels like the only way to cope. Routines become the habits that keep the wheels turning. Put the rubbish out. Go to work. Pick up the kids. Get the groceries. Cook dinner. Watch TV. Fold the washing. And repeat.

Familiarity removes the need to think too far beyond the everyday stuff of life. We chase our tails like mad puppies, making, as Welsh poet, W. H. Davies, wrote... 'no time to stand and stare.'

And then the sideswipe comes, as it always does. The wakeup call that brings you to a screeching halt, and suddenly you're forced to think differently. They are called wakeup calls for a reason. Perhaps it's a health scare or the loss of a job or a loved one. Rusty thinking is little help when you're trying to remember how you used to deal with upheavals.

One of the joys of getting to a certain stage of life, is that we have, in theory, more time to think. More time to reflect on what got us here and where to next. At last, perhaps there is time to stand and stare. Except that we've been on autopilot for so long that the default programme is still running.

The amount of noise and distraction we have to contend with simply makes it more difficult to create space for thinking.

Thinking for ourselves is most definitely a choice. It's a decision to value our ability to think, to take charge of our thinking and to value it.

In a similar vein, Edward Stanley (1826-1893) suggested that 'those who think they have no time for bodily exercise will sooner or later have to find time for illness.'

If we don't make opportunities to take full control of our own thinking, then we'd better be ready for the consequences of shallow, quick fix answers, from a diet of populist media and everyone's opinion.

It's like your personal equivalent of driverless cars. Great for getting you from one town to another, but you still need to make the call about where you are headed and to take responsibility for the ride. As recent accident reports show, it's a death-trap to assume that you don't need to keep your eye on the road.

Thinking for ourselves doesn't involve being super smart, rather, as Charlie Munger says, it's simply avoiding making dumb decisions. That doesn't mean all our decisions will be great, but the better we think them through, the better the potential outcome. Equally, better decisions aren't always the ones you spend hours ruminating on. Cud chewing is for cows, not people.

## **So how do you get better at thinking?**

**Make regular, uninterrupted time to listen to what you think.** Regular means daily, and uninterrupted allows you to follow a chain of thought through to a conclusion. This is special time for important stuff beyond what to have for dinner, reading the news, scanning Facebook or playing candy crush on your smartphone.

The best time for this is the morning. Yes, really, and as we get older, most of us become morning people, so that's a bonus. Why morning? Because that's when your thinking is freshest, before the distractions of the day overwhelm. It's also when you are best at making decisions. Research is clear that later in the day you'll make worse choices because your brain is tired.

**Where do you think?** A quiet place for you. No distractions, just you and your beautiful mind. It's also useful to write things



down. Author Julia Cameron has a wonderful strategy called Morning Pages, where you write three pages of longhand, every morning. It's a stream of consciousness process that gives your mind permission to explore. Seed a problem, ask a question, and see what you really think. It's totally private, so no-one is there to critique. Just write.

**Make thinking a priority.** This is your time. No-one else's opinions matter, you've the rest of the day to consult if you need to. Keep this time and space sacred as a gift to your self. You're future-proofing. If others ask what you're doing or scoff at your process, just smile and ignore them. You're doing your mental exercise and that is just as important to your future as the physical. It may be that you don't even need to say that you're doing this. After all, do you explain when and why you clean your teeth? Make clear thinking into a habit that is just as important.

**Catch your autopilot moments and focus on what you're doing.** Like my friend Jane, making her lasagne, you will have loads of automatic processes. As you go through your day, notice when they arise and slow down to focus. What steps are you taking? Can you identify exactly what you are doing? Chances are that if you've been doing your version of making lasagne for so long, then you won't have questioned if there's a better way. Just because you've always done something in one way, doesn't mean you should continue to do so!

**Learning about how others think is a great way to improve your own thinking.** Just as you learned how to cook, to drive and to do your job, so too we must learn how to think well. We all think, but it's the quality of the process that determines the outcome. There are some wonderful role models for thinking. In your local library (yes, they exist, so

use them or they'll be gone) and on the internet, you'll find an amazing treasure trove of thinking wisdom. Two of my favourite thinkers are American billionaires Charlie Munger and Warren Buffet. Their clear ideas and philosophy make great reading. As I mentioned earlier, Munger says our job is to avoid making dumb decisions. Sounds simple, huh? The best part is when you listen across disciplines. If you're in business, learn from thinkers in the community. If you're creative, learn from scientists. It's in the intersections that the most exciting ideas happen.

**Test your thinking with other good thinkers.** If you're lucky, then there will be people in your life who think well. You'll have figured out by now that I'm not talking about the opinionated bully who overrides everyone else with their ego-driven rants, or the crowd-sourced repeater who simply says what everyone else thinks. Or the 'I dunno', disengaged, unthinker who takes the lazy option and has no opinion.

No, I mean the person who listens, weighs up the information, questions and adds to it. That person is your goal. That's who we aspire to be. You'll recognise them, as they're the ones we call wise. Find them. Track them down and buy them coffee. I'll often ask my wise ones if I can run something by them. I find that if I am patient and respectful then they are more than happy to help. The best part is that I seem to think better when I'm with them. These thinkers are pieces of gold in your universe.

The final step comes back to you. After all, it's your thinking we're talking about. When you start anything, there's a process of learning. When you're upgrading your mental software, it's not just a matter of plugging a new chip into your brain. Instead you'll need to unlearn habits and practices of a lifetime, and relearn new ways. Start small by questioning your decisions.

There's a big difference between questioning and second guessing. One is a rigorous challenge to justify your position, at which point you accept and move on. Second guessing just keeps you in the repeat loop. It's self defeating. So, choose what you want to think through thoroughly. There will always be some stuff on autopilot, that's how we avoid overwhelm.

**In those precious, quiet morning spaces when it's just you and your thoughts, keep asking, what do I think? Why? How could I think differently about this?**

**As the old adage says, your best thinking got you here. If you want to end up some place better, then changing your thinking is the key.**



**Jenny Magee**

Jenny Magee works with Boomers to make the most of the second half of their lives. Her latest book **A Bold Life – How Boomer Women are Reinventing Life Beyond Fifty** is available at good bookstores or from [www.jennymagee.com](http://www.jennymagee.com) If you are looking to make significant changes, contact Jenny via email to [jenny@jennymagee.com](mailto:jenny@jennymagee.com)