



Chapter One
A useful past



I was waiting for my coffee. They had said they would call my name when it was ready. I was tempted to check my phone—not for anything in particular, but just because that’s what I do. That’s what we all do. Just stare at our phones. I might look at Facebook, check email, maybe Twitter. Just flick through stuff. Then they called my name.

‘Simon?’

‘Thank you.’ I took the coffee. I had ordered a skinny latte—with two sugars, which obviously kills the ‘skinny’. I’m not even sure why I ordered the latte, as the milk bloats me. I should’ve ordered a long black with no sugar. I would have felt better if I’d done that. The long black tastes terrible, though.

The truth is I was stressed. Random thoughts were spinning through my head. I had been grumpy and very anxious lately. I guess it had been a busy time, at work and in my life. I had been asked to fly from my home in Melbourne

to present at our software conference in Barcelona. While I was happy to do it, that's a long way to go to make a presentation. Seemed like something I could have done from my computer. But it was our global conference, and I was pitching the results of the Australasian team—and, after all, it was Barcelona!

It was then that I heard a familiar voice behind me.

I turned around to see two women deeply immersed in conversation. It took me a moment to take in the scene and to recognise Sarah, whom I had gone to high school with many years ago.

'Well hello stranger!' she said when she noticed me. 'Simon, how are you? It's great to see you!'

'You too,' I replied. She was smiling. Her eyes struck me immediately. They always had. Bright. Blue. Awake. 'Sorry, I didn't mean to eavesdrop. I just heard a voice I knew. This is a definite blast from the past.'

'It is indeed! This is my friend Emily,' Sarah said, motioning to the woman opposite her. Emily smiled out of the corner of her mouth.

‘Nice to meet you, Simon,’ she responded quietly. She had a strikingly calm persona that actually made me feel quite frenetic in her presence.

‘Simon Davies!’ Sarah broke in to recapture centre stage. ‘What are you doing with yourself? Obviously about to take a trip.’

‘I’m going to Barcelona. Or Singapore then on to Barcelona. I’ve got this software conference thing. It should be good. I’ve never been there before—and it’s summer in Barcelona, after all. It should be beautiful.’

‘Do you have to go anywhere right now or would you like to join us?’ Sarah smiled and Emily motioned for me to sit down.

Again I couldn’t help noticing how blue Sarah’s eyes were. I think I might have been staring. I was a little reluctant to sit down because I didn’t want to intrude. I knew Sarah, but not well enough that I felt entitled to interrupt her conversation. Also I sort of like my time alone in the airline lounge. I look forward to enjoying the free food and wine and being there by myself for a while before

my flight leaves. I wasn't sure that I needed to be dialed into a session with this emissary from my past, no matter how blue her eyes. But after a brief hesitation I sank into a seat next to Sarah and across from Emily.

'So tell me, Sarah,' I began, 'what are you doing with yourself these days?'

'I'm heading up a business in the health care industry. Emily is my new assistant and will be working on some projects with me. We were just getting to know each other.'

I smiled at Emily.

'We're off to Singapore for a conference. Our business works specifically in the nursing industry. We were just talking about how much nursing has changed over the past 20 years.'

'I'm sure it has. Seems it has all become a little less patient-centric than it used to be,' I said. 'My mother was a nurse for 40 years.'

'That's right, I remember that. By the way, Simon, I was really sorry to hear about your dad. I heard about his passing at our reunion last year. How is your mother going?'

‘She’s doing pretty well. It’s been almost five years now.’ Saying it aloud, I realised I was surprised by how much time had passed. ‘It’s strange, because in some ways it feels like he was here yesterday. Other times it seems like the memories are starting to fade. Anyway, my mother is doing really well, thank you for asking. She has her friends and her garden.’

‘That’s good, Simon. I’m glad she works in her garden. It’s so important to have a hobby to keep you going in the tough times.’

I agreed, even as it hit me that I didn’t really have a ‘hobby’ I was passionate about.

‘What about love? Is there anyone special in your life?’ she asked with a coy smile. Time was treating Sarah well.

‘Wow, straight to the personal questions today, Sarah,’ I said, considering trying to dodge that one. ‘But no, nothing right now. I’ve been close a few times. How about you?’

‘Yes, I have two boys and a girl. John and I have been married 15 years now. It’s amazing how time flies,’ Sarah answered. ‘Emily and I were just talking about relationships, life and how sliding door moments can change everything.’

‘I was telling her about how I met my husband, Paul,’ Emily jumped in. ‘He’s English ... Sliding door moments are pretty crazy. I met Paul at this pub that my friends and I were not even going to go into. We decided to pop in for a quick drink, and there he was. We met, and now we’ve been married 12 years.’

‘Congratulations,’ I said. It sounds like both of you are doing well. It is amazing how things like that happen, Emily. A chance meeting and your world shifts. I really do believe that everything in life happens for a reason.’

As I said those words I realised I was just being polite. I don’t even know why I said it, because that wasn’t really what I believed. In fact, I’ve always made fun of people who say things like that. I guess I was just trying to be nice.

‘We were talking about those kinds of moments,’ Sarah continued her thought. ‘And I was just sharing with Emily a new idea I’ve discovered. It’s so important in life to work out the things you can control and the things you can’t control.’

‘Sure,’ I agreed, wondering where she was going with this. Lately I’d been feeling like there was actually nothing in my life I could control.

‘The idea of sorting out what you can and can’t control is hugely important in our business because we have to deal with so much bureaucracy,’ Sarah explained. ‘But I recently came across an idea that is even better. It actually shifts how we look at each individual situation we are in so we can get the best results from it. This is something you would be able to use in your business too.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘I’m always up for something new.’

‘The idea is called *useful belief*.’

‘Huh. What’s that? Tell me about this useful belief.’ I smiled encouragingly. I was now thinking I might have caught them well into their conversation. It was possible too that they were a glass of wine ahead of me.

‘This idea is changing our approach to business. During the course of any one week, we are overloaded with meetings, emails and people trying to take up our valuable time. We all live in a world of information overload. We are bombarded every day—and a lot of it is negative, even a bit soul destroying. Useful belief has simply made me a whole lot more effective in the face of all this. It’s an idea that challenges us to pick through

all this information, filter out the noise and just focus on what is useful.’

‘Okay,’ I said, again wondering where this was leading. ‘Give me an example of useful belief.’

‘Really it’s about focusing on what is helpful in dealing with a situation we can’t change. For example, I believe this is the greatest time ever to work in the nursing industry. I don’t know if that’s *actually* true. But here’s what makes it so powerful: because I *believe* now is the best time ever to be in nursing, it makes me better at my job—because I am living in the present and making decisions about right now. Unlike so many directors who are trying to make decisions based on their own experience 20 years ago.’

‘So if you are going to work in your industry, you need to believe it’s the best time in the history of nursing, whether or not it really is the best time?’

‘Exactly. Truth is irrelevant. Because once I have a useful belief about the present, I will see the opportunities that we need to capitalise on right now.’

‘That makes sense,’ I admitted, reflecting that I had definitely not had a useful belief about my own career in the past couple of years.

‘Let me give you another example,’ Sarah went on. ‘We were talking about families before. Obviously, a lot of people hang on to their past. You and I went to high school together. Odds are we both know people who still dwell on things that happened to them when they were 17 years old. I meet people all the time who are still obsessed by the behaviour of their parents during their childhood. So here is an example of a useful belief: we had the parents we were supposed to have. Do you think that’s true?’

‘I’m not sure whether I believe that,’ I said. ‘I mean, I’m not sure I’ve really thought about it like that. I wish it was true. I guess if I had the parents I was supposed to have I’m sure they would have been a lot richer.’

We all laughed.

‘Here’s the thing, though,’ Sarah explained. ‘It doesn’t matter whether or not it’s true. It’s *useful* to believe it is. If you believe that, it is easier to make sense of what you

learned from your parents and the importance they had on your life.’

‘I’m hearing you, Sarah,’ I said. ‘But I’m just not totally sold on this idea of truth being so malleable. I mean, truth is truth, isn’t it?’

‘Simon, truth is often really overrated! And it usually doesn’t help you get the result you want. What matters is whether or not that idea is a useful thing to believe. And truth is subjective anyway. If you and I went out to dinner, our interpretations of what happened at that dinner could be completely different. Maybe you thought it was the best meal you’ve ever had; maybe I hated everything I was served. Where is the truth in that? Most of the time what people believe to be true is really just their *perception* of reality. Therefore, we can all create our own reality.’

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘Certainly there would be a difference between this reality and delusion. I can’t just decide that I am a professional basketball player.’

‘Of course not,’ Sarah replied with a smile. ‘But in the context of *all of our realities*, having useful beliefs is a game changer. Let me give you another example.

‘We’ve all heard parents complain about the behaviour of “kids today”. Like, “I can’t understand these kids today and their computer games. When we were kids, we were outside playing. We were real kids. We had a stick and a ball and a bike! We stayed out until our parents flicked the porch light on and off, which was our cue to come inside for dinner. We were *real* kids!”

‘This is not a useful belief. When people ask me I say, “I love this generation of kids. This is the greatest generation of kids *ever* in the history of the world! And it’s the greatest time ever to be a parent!” If you ask me whether this is true, I’d say I don’t care. I just know that believing it makes me a better parent.’

‘Okay,’ I responded, ‘I think I agree with you. In fact, I think most people probably do this unconsciously on some level. They try to make the best of every situation.’

‘That’s close, yes...but it’s not really it,’ she said emphatically. ‘The key is to ask yourself at a conscious level, “What is the most useful belief I could have about this situation I’m walking into?”’

By now Sarah had begun to pique my interest. It wasn't an entirely unfamiliar concept. I felt that most people talk about being positive in difficult situations. I had never put it together in such a simple yet powerful way, though. *Useful belief.*

'I have watched successful people over many years,' she continued. 'Do you know what I have noticed? They solve problems and keep moving forward. They deal with situations and they unconsciously ask themselves a simple question: "What is the most useful thing I could do right now? What strategy can I employ that would make this situation the best it can possibly be?" I want to help people bring this into their conscious awareness so they can use it in their everyday lives.

'How often do people go into a meeting believing it will be a complete waste of time? Mind you, it may not be a *great* meeting. But let's say you are required to attend. Once you know you have no choice about being there, ask yourself, "What is the most useful position I could take in this meeting?" This changes your entire approach to the meeting. Who knows? You might even get something out of it.'

Sarah shifted her body and squared up to me. ‘In my business we go to conferences all the time. I have seen so many speakers over the years, and many of them say similar things. They say things like “Be positive!” or “When life gives you lemons, make lemonade!” These messages may make you feel good in the short term, but they are not really *useful*.’

I smiled. Having attended countless such conferences myself, I knew exactly what she was talking about.

‘The reason they are not really useful is that sometimes life is *not* positive. Sometimes it’s not lemonade! Sometimes things are just flat-out bad. You lose your job, your relationship ends, your father or some other loved one passes away. Positive thinking won’t solve any of this. The question to ask is, what is the most useful strategy to move me out of this moment and into a better place? What can I believe that will help me out here?’

‘I like it,’ I acknowledged. ‘It makes sense...I’m still curious about your comment about parents, though. You said we had the parents we were supposed to have. How can you know that? How is that useful?’ The thought

had never occurred to me. I know a lot of people who are successful *despite* their parents; there is no way they were the parents they were supposed to have.

‘It’s useful because it *is*,’ she replied elliptically. ‘They *were* your parents. There is no way to change it! Some people’s biggest frustration is that they constantly try to change things over which they have no power. It is useful to believe that your parents were the parents you were supposed to have. They taught you about life—and often about who you do or do not want to be. Either way, the lessons were a gift you could handle. Not everyone could handle the pressure of having your parents. But *you* could. That’s why they were *your* parents.’

‘It may be that none of what I just said is true, by the way. But you know what? It doesn’t matter. Truth is overrated. Useful is simply more important than true when it comes to empowering yourself.’

‘Nice,’ I said as I took a final sip of my very average coffee. ‘I like it. Even cynical me can see the value in that.’

‘We were talking about this before you joined us. You have no control over who your parents are, or who your

brothers and sisters are. You have no control over the city, suburb or town you grew up in. These are the cards you were dealt. But you have a choice in how you view those cards.

‘Every day, people decide they have a reason to not be successful. Every person has a story they could tell as an excuse for them not doing their best. So, if that is the case, it is useful for that story to *mean* something, to have led us to where we are supposed to be. The idea that we all had the parents we were supposed to have is empowering. It means that it meant something, and that we learned something. It means our joy, happiness, suffering and pain were all supposed to happen—to teach us something.’

‘Wow, you *do* make speeches,’ I laughed. ‘You always did, though. And you know what? I think you’re right. I do not look at my life like this. In fact, lately I have been generally angry at the entire world. My beliefs haven’t been very useful at all.’

‘There’s a question I like to ask my staff.’ Sarah looked thoughtfully at me. ‘I’ll ask you the same question because I knew you back when you were 18 years old. If you could

go back in time and give your 18-year-old self advice about life, what would you tell him?’

I stared back at her. How would I advise my 18-year-old self? Would I tell myself to do things differently? Probably. ‘Look,’ I said, ‘I had a lot of things going on when I was 18. I made some mistakes. I’m sure most of us did. But there are definitely some things I did that were real mistakes. I regret them ...’

‘I saw a TV interview one time, Simon. This female reporter was speaking with a man who had been a drug addict for a number of years. I was listening to his story, quite interested, as he told of how he pulled himself out of his situation. He went on to be hired for television, hosted his own show, and he was now being interviewed about his amazing story.’

I was listening, but then she said something that jolted me to another level.

‘But the story wasn’t what interested me,’ she said. ‘What interested me was the next question. Because the interviewer asked the very same thing I just asked you: “If you could go back and give your 18-year-old self advice, what would you say?”’

‘I remember thinking, what a stupid question to ask him! I mean the answer is obvious. He should tell himself, “Don’t do drugs!” But what happened next got me thinking.

‘The man looked at the interviewer and became a bit angry. He said, “I know what you’re trying to do. You want me to look at my younger self and advise him to take another direction in life. Well, I want you to know something. I *wouldn’t* do that. Every link in the chain has led me here—to being the person I am today. I did some horrible things to other people when I was on drugs. But you know what? It all led me to where I am today. And I am grateful for that.”

‘The next thing he said blew my mind,’ she continued. ‘He said, “I would walk right up to my 18-year-old self and say three words: *Just keep going.*”’

As Sarah finished her story, I flashed to myself at 18. Just keep going. I had so many regrets, and felt like I’d made so many mistakes. Could I walk up to myself at 18 and look myself in the eye and say, ‘Just keep going’? If I did that, it would lead me right back to here.

Then it hit me. Maybe *here* is where I am supposed to be.

‘Well,’ I said after a pause, making a move to stand up, ‘this has been an amazing conversation. You have given me a lot to think about. I really like this idea.’

‘I’m glad,’ Sarah said. ‘It was great to see you again.’

‘It was really great to see you too, Sarah. Emily, very nice to meet you. I think there’s a lot in our conversation for me. Anyway, I should probably put this useful idea to the test. What would be useful right now is for me to excuse myself as I am well behind in preparing for my meetings in Barcelona. So I’m going to go and do a little work, but I hope you have a fantastic trip to Singapore and wish you both all the best.’

Both of them smiled and shook my hand. I thought—okay, I wished—that maybe Bright Eyes would kiss me on the cheek. But she didn’t. She shook my hand and we wished each other well. I was happy we’d caught up again and struck up a conversation. Useful belief. I got it.

I pulled my carry-on bag over my shoulder and made my way to a quiet table in the corner of the lounge. This conversation really had given me a lot to think about.

Here I was, a reasonably successful businessman off to Barcelona. Presenting at this global conference was quite a professional accomplishment. Despite this success, though, for some time I had been feeling a certain emptiness in my life.

I think I had been feeling a little disconnected ever since my father passed away, but I wasn't sure why. I know that since his death I had had a stronger sense of my own mortality. And I had developed a sense that nothing seemed really quite as important as it used to.

For one thing, I had become less emotional about the cycle of parents and children. While I still had memories of my father, I felt as though I was somehow losing control of them. As the years had passed, these memories had faded, the moments slipping into oblivion. Obviously, I was doing everything I could to hold on to as much as possible. But I couldn't help the fact that the gradual erosion of these memories and moments had left me feeling less significant somehow.

Losing someone close to you is a part of life, I reasoned. It is important to have a useful belief about it.

The conversation with Sarah brought back some strong memories. Recently these memories had hit me at the strangest times. I would be walking along the street and something would trigger an image of my dad.

I could still remember the phone call from my mother on the day he died. It felt as though I was a character in a movie. It was 6:30 in the morning and I was still a bit groggy as I picked up the receiver. Even through the fog I could sense the sadness at the other end of the phone.

‘Simon, it’s your mother here. I have some bad news. Your dad has died.’

It had been a call I had half anticipated. My father was 70 years old and had some serious health issues. He had just come home from surgery, but because the hospital had sent him home I had assumed he was going to be okay.

Some older people are ready to die. I don’t think my father was. He was still working and in many ways seemed very happy. I think he had found a certain sense of peace in his life that had eluded him during my childhood. Maybe that’s what made it so hard for me. It didn’t seem ‘useful’ for him to die when he should have had so many great years ahead of him.

I tried to silence my thoughts. I had the long flight to Singapore ahead of me. I needed to just settle in and relax. That was a useful idea. Relax on the long trip to come.

Somehow, though, I just couldn't shut my mind off. I recognised that there were a lot of things in my life that weren't useful. I managed a lot of people in my job, and I felt like I flew off the handle all the time. I was stressed and actually a little angry. When push came to shove, a lot of things in my life were frustrating me.

This was brought into sharp focus when I boarded the plane to find the usual chaos of disorganised passengers blocking the aisle as they groped about in their bulging bags before trying to cram them into the overhead lockers—all seemingly in slow motion. What is *wrong* with these people, I thought, as I felt my frustration build.

Then, abruptly, I asked myself a simple question: Is it *useful* to get angry with a bunch of strangers you are about to share a long journey with? I smiled to myself. Probably not.

I was more than ready for them just to turn that seatbelt sign off and serve up the drinks. I've thought enough about useful stuff today, I decided.

A useful checklist

1 This is the best time in the history of the world to be in your industry/company/job. Is this true? It doesn't matter. It is useful to see the opportunities of the right now.

2 This is the greatest time ever to be a parent (and to be a child). When you believe this, you are more present as a parent.

3 This experience (meeting/trip/appointment/day) is definitely happening, so what is the most useful mindset for me to go into it with?

4 You had the parents you were supposed to have. True? It doesn't matter. It is useful to recognise that they taught you what you were supposed to learn, no matter how horrible or, for that matter, wonderful the experience.

5 The 'reality' of this situation is bad. What is the most useful strategy to lift me from ground zero to one? What is the most useful strategy to move me from point two to point five?

6 Everything that happens teaches us things.

