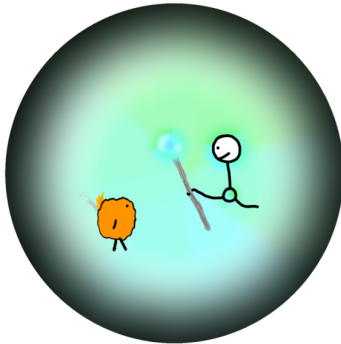




Story Rules on Saturday

COLLECTION OF BOOK REVIEWS – 2022

'The Story of Us'
by Tim Urban



This is technically not a book – it is a series of long-form blog posts. But boy, is it more thought-provoking than several books I've read.

You may have come across Tim Urban because of his viral TED Talk '[Inside the Mind of a Master Procrastinator](#)'. While the TED talk got him millions of views (59M and counting), his original claim to fame is the blog, '[Wait but Why](#)'.

In a world obsessed with tweets, reels, snaps and other short-form content, Tim stands out with his utterly insouciant disregard to our

supposedly **falling attention spans**.

Tim's posts run into several tens-of-thousands of words (some series are as long as a book). And it's all there, free to read on his blog!

His strengths are two-fold:

– **Tim thinks deep** – he's a modern day philosopher. He grapples with complex topics and gets to the depth of that topic. This itself is a rare skill. But what makes it even more special is that...

– He **explains** the topic in a **simple** yet **entertaining** way. Most philosophers struggle to explain something in simple language. Even if they manage to do that, very few are able to make their writing engaging and fun to read. Tim is a one-of-a-kind genius.

The Story of Us

What I really like about this blog series is that it tackles something critical that affects all of humankind – how the story we tell ourselves about society influences the way we live and interact with each other.

While the series is US-focused and tries to explain why there is such a **massive and widening cleavage** in the US society, the concepts and frameworks that Tim uses to explain the divergence can be used for any country, including India.

The biggest insight for me was the difference between Primitive Thinking and Higher-Mind thinking. These are simple enough concepts – but the visuals and examples Tim uses do a stellar job of ensuring that you really *get* it and actually start making changes in your thinking (and actions) based on better awareness.

Here are five storytelling techniques that I enjoyed in this blog series:

1. Foundational depths

Most writers think and write at a superficial level. For instance, consider the question: Why is there so much animosity between Democrats and Republicans in the US today?

Here's how different thinkers might approach that question:

A staunch Democrat: Because of Trump, duh! And all those illiberal, gun-loving, fascist Reps!

A staunch Republican: Because of these immigration-loving, individual-freedom-hating, weak-willed Commie Dems!

An inexperienced political analyst: It's all because of how social media amplifies sensationalist events, allows dissemination of fake news and enables echo chambers.

An experienced political analyst: It all started post WW2, which was last the time when Americans of all political affiliation were the most united. The Vietnam War was a major salvo against that unity. In recent history, one major trigger point for things to go south was former Speaker of the House **Newt's Gingrich elevation of partisan politics** into an art form.

All good. Detailed, in-depth.

But here's how Tim Urban would approach that question:

Tim Urban: We need to start with our genes...

"The problem is that the animal world isn't really an animal world—it's a world of trillions of strands of genetic information, each one hell-bent on immortality. And in a universe that wants to turn order into chaos whenever possible, the immortality of anything—let alone a delicate and complex genetic code—is a constant uphill battle. Most of Earth's gene strands don't last very long, and genes that weren't

talented enough at the immortality game are long gone. The genes on Earth today are the miracle outliers on both the motivation and talent front—such incredible survival specialists that they're currently almost four billion years old and counting.

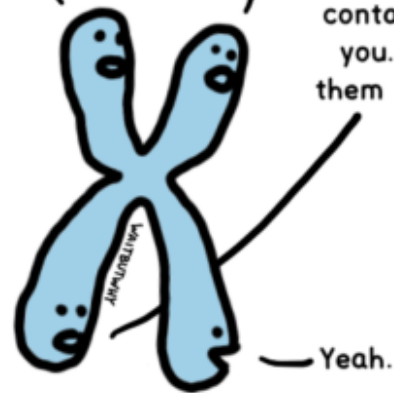
Animals are just a hack these outlier genes came up with—temporary containers designed to carry the genes and help them stay immortal. If genes could talk to their animal, they'd probably issue a few simple commands:

(And then he follows up with this visual)

Stay alive and well functioning as long as possible.

And then pass us into new containers
before you inevitably deteriorate.

Once we're in new containers, those
containers are more important than
you. Sacrifice yourself if it'll help
them fulfill the first two instructions.



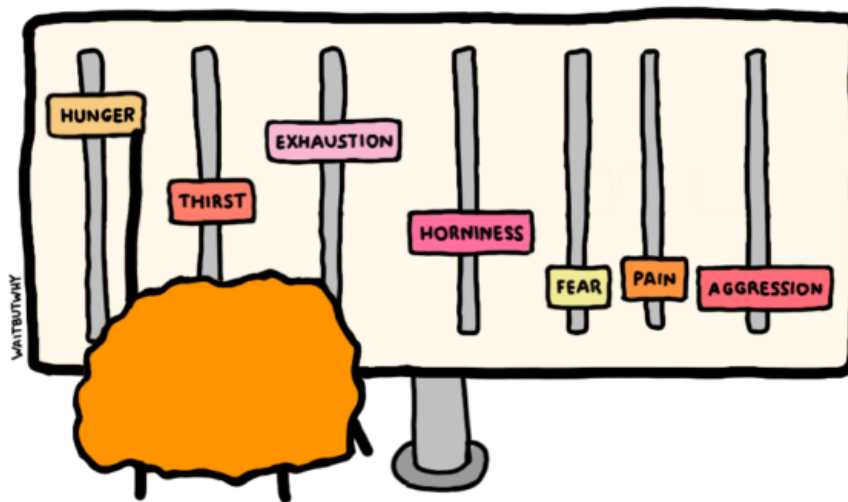
This bedrock thinking – let's get to the root, the real root of this matter – is what makes Tim such an arresting writer.

2. Visuals

Our brains have a **disproportionate amount of capacity** devoted to visual processing. Sure your words can evoke visuals in the readers minds... but having vivid explanatory pictures can go a long way in demystifying abstract, complex topics.

Tim gets that. But his genius is to avoid the tried-and-tested route of publicly available image sources like Unsplash or Wikipedia. He just draws his visuals himself. And so you come across funny stick figures and badly drawn pandas, bears and bunnies in between blocks of text. Apart from giving an endearing quality to his posts, they also act as visual relief and add humour.

Take for instance, his depiction of how our genes 'control' our actions through a bunch of emotion levers!



It's not easy doing this. These visuals take time to create and can become distractions for the writer. Tim has mentioned about how he would get lost in some minor details of a drawing and end up questioning the utility of it all!

But for the reader, it ensures that complex ideas are easily understood.

3. Anthropomorphism

This is my favourite Tim Urban Storytelling technique and I've **written earlier** about it. The way he infuses abstract concepts with human

(or animal) characteristics is an art form. We may have heard of the 'reptilian brain' or the 'pre-frontal cortex' or even brain regions such as amygdala or hippocampus. Instead of using such abstract/scientific terms, Tim converts them into anthropomorphic characters.

In fact, just within the human brain, Tim has created a roster of characters: the fiery Primitive Mind, the wise Higher Mind, the distracted Instant Gratification Monkey, the alarm-raising Panic Monster, the insecure Social Survival Mammoth... Tim has a vivid and fascinating imagination.

4. Historical context

We often wonder why we struggle so much with willpower. Why do we get angry? Why do we see an attack on a closely-held belief as an attack on ourselves?

The answer: Our Primitive Mind – the source of many of our anxieties and emotionally-ridden reactions – has gotten several millennia of experience being in charge of things. Here's Tim:

The Primitive Mind in every animal—humans included—has been optimized to near perfection at getting animals to survive long enough to pass their precious genes along to new containers.

Scientists aren't positive about the timeline, but many believe that all humans in all parts of the world lived in hunter-gatherer tribes as recently as 11,000 BC. So 13,000 years ago—or, if we call a generation 25 years, about 500 generations ago.

500 generations isn't enough time for evolution to take a shit. So the Primitive Mind—a hardwired part of us—is still stuck in the world of 11,000 BC. Which means we're all like computers running on the highly unimpressive Windows 11000 BC operating system, and there's no way to do a software update.

(And then he has this striking visual to accompany that):

no matter what your ethnicity or family history, your great⁴⁹⁷ grandmother was a gatherer in a hunter-gatherer tribe

500 GENERATIONS

(25 years per generation)

11,000 BC
all humans everywhere
are hunter-gatherers

your
great¹⁸³ grandmother
helped build the
Egyptian pyramids

your great⁷⁷ grandmother
was friends with Jesus

your great-great-great-
great-great-great-
grandmother remembers
when the US started

your grandmother

your mother

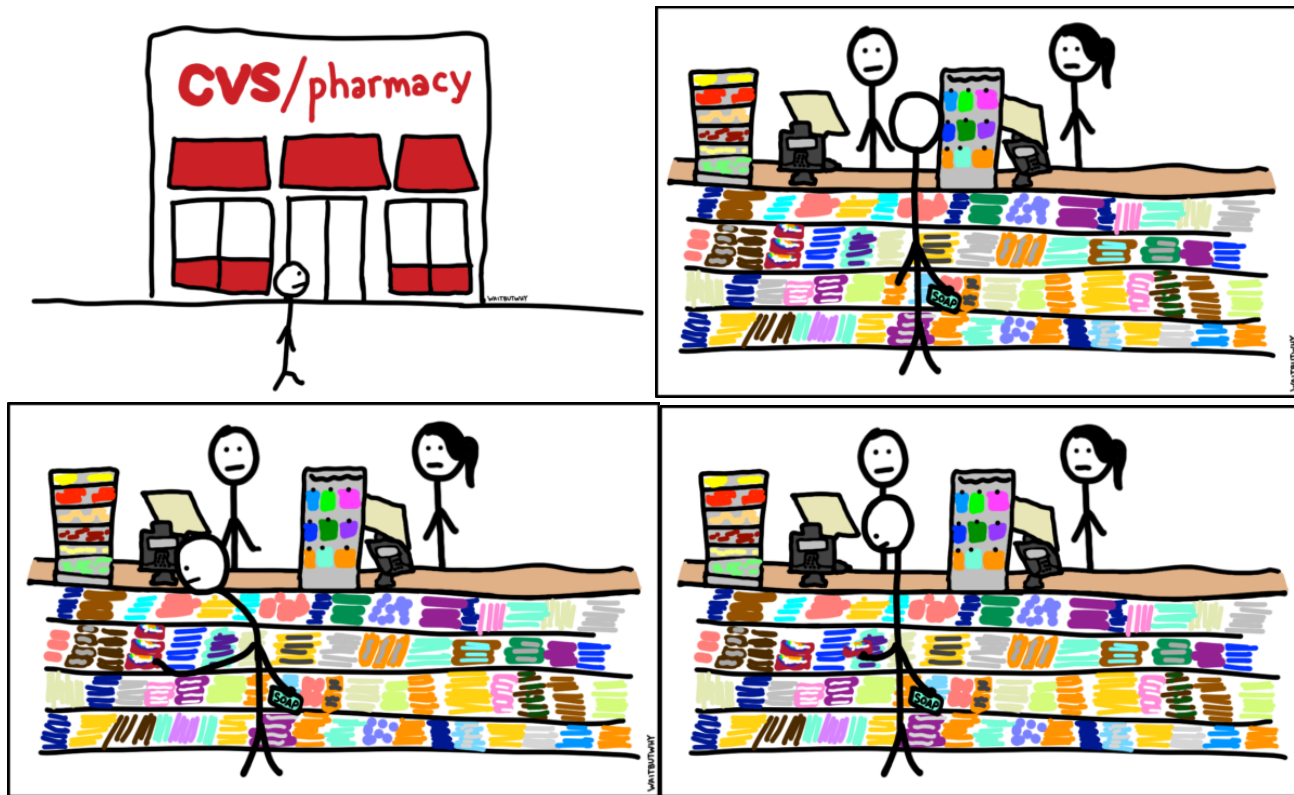
your
great²¹⁷ grandmother
was around when
written history began

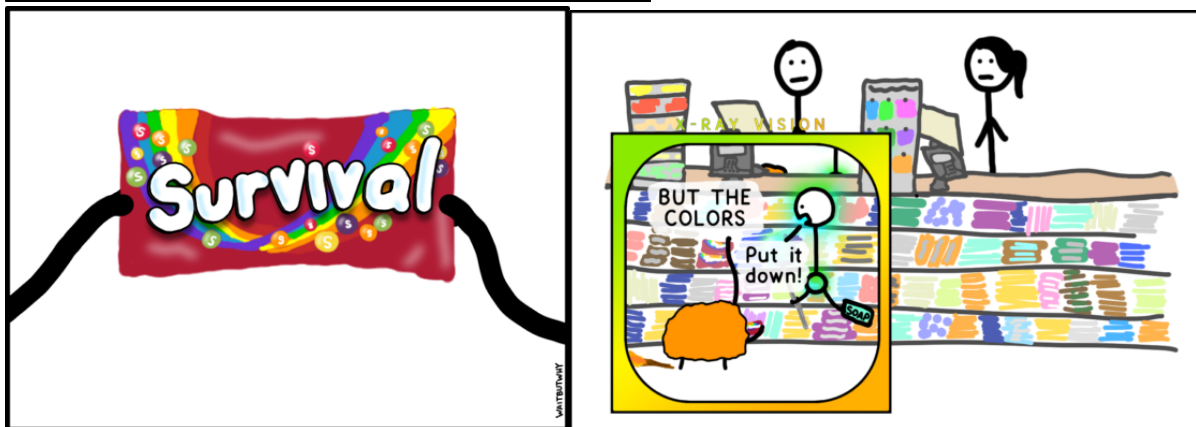
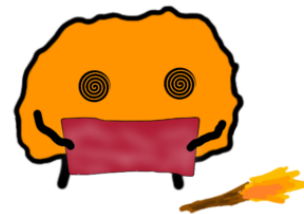
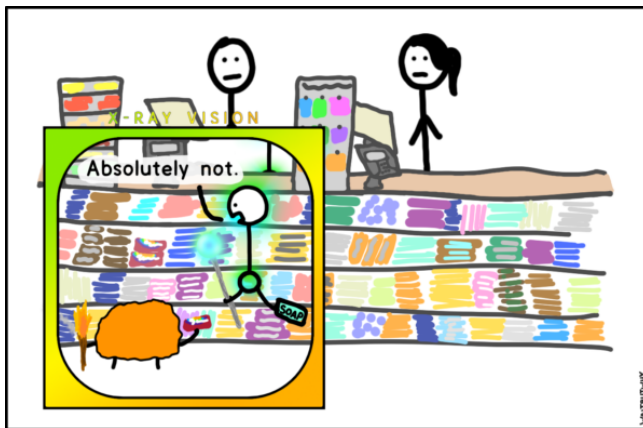
you

5. Concrete examples

We are aware of a lot of things in theory – but sometimes we need a real concrete example to explain how the theory works.

For instance, Tim is trying to explain how we are in a constant state of battle between the Primitive Mind and The Higher Mind within our brain. He could talk about the concept in abstraction for eons, but it wouldn't be as effective (or hilarious) as this cartoon strip... (The fiery blob in the cartoon is the Primitive Mind and the wise sounding guy with a glowing staff is the Higher Mind):



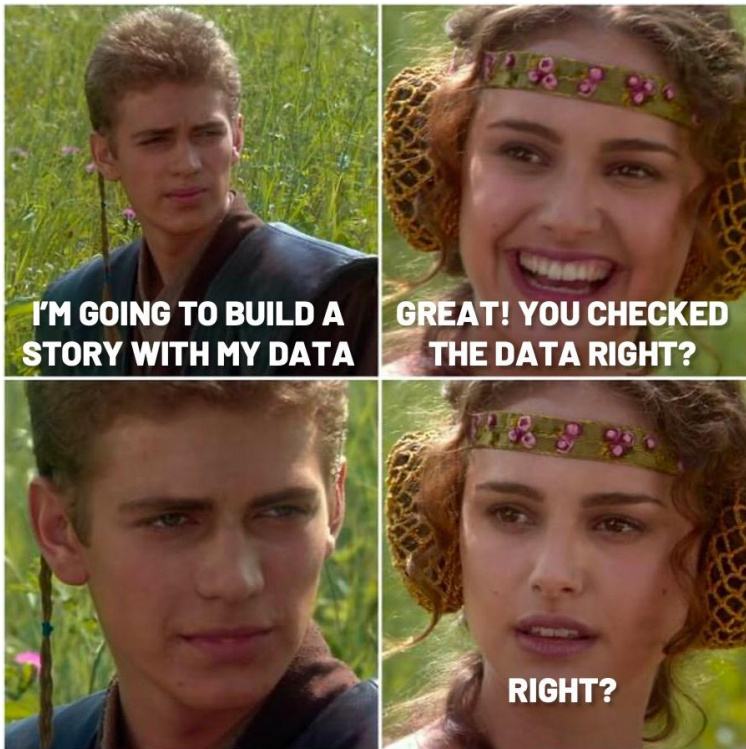


Source: Tim Urban, 'The Story of Us'
 Seriously, this is hilarious stuff.

His writing is life changing. I've seen myself change how I approach debates and discussions now. If I react sharply or emotionally, I ask myself – hey, was that my Primitive Mind speaking? Let's try to go back to the Higher Mind here.

Tim's work is essential reading. For ALL humans. I'm surprised he's not recommended reading in schools and colleges ... ok, perhaps the

	<p>occasional swearing doesn't help!</p> <p>But if that doesn't bother you (and why should it), make sure to line up this story series, which has a couple more chapters to come, in your reading list.</p>
<p>'Whole Numbers and Half Truths' by Rukmini S</p>	<p>Quick – answer whether these questions are True or False:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Delhi has the highest rate of crimes against women in India 2. India faces massive rural-urban migration 3. UP is safer for women than many big states: NCRB report 4. India has a large middle class 5. You are a part of that middle class <p>If you answered 'True' for any of the questions above, you need to read Rukmini's book.</p> <p>I teach how to craft narratives with data and one of the things I <i>used</i> to take for granted was the 'data' part.</p> <p>I mean, of course, in this age of abundant data, everyone has access to up-to-date, comprehensive and accurate information right?</p>



Meme Image [Source](#)

A few months back, when I reviewed Brent Dykes' 'Effective Data Storytelling', I [wrote about the importance](#) of ensuring that the data part of the equation is tied up and not taken for granted.

For, if you aren't rigorous about getting the right data, you end up with narratives which may be divorced from the truth. Just like those True/False statements above.

But if those statements are not true, then what is the truth?

As per Rukmini's book, the answer is, um, complicated. In a series of ten illuminating chapters she covers a wide range of topics about India – from crime to education to income, to eating habits to how we vote and how we fall ill – and deftly unveils a truer picture of India.

Here are some fascinating lessons from this eye-opening book:

1. In so many standard narratives, where we think we know the truth, the reality is much more complex and nuanced

a. For instance, take rural-urban migration.

The dominant narrative is that men from villages, mostly from north and east India are moving to cities in west and south India.

The reality is surprising:

Rural-rural migration, moving from one village to another, dwarfs rural-urban migration... Part of the reason that rural-rural migration is such a big part of the Indian migration story is because migration, overall, is overwhelmingly a female tale. Migration as it is usually understood in India is the movement of people (usually men) in search of jobs. But the truth is that migration in India is an overwhelmingly female phenomenon because of the sociological nature of marriage in the country, which tends to follow the norm of caste endogamy (marrying within one's caste) but village exogamy (marrying outside one's village). Women make up 68 per cent of all migrants in India and 66 per cent of them migrate because of marriage.

Of course we do have rural-urban migration, but not as much as we think it is prevalent (emphasis mine):

Most states—including those that are seeing the rise of strong anti-'outsider' sentiment—have an extremely low share of actual 'outsiders'. Richer western and southern states might tell themselves that migrants from the north are flooding their states, but in reality just 9 per cent of people currently living in Maharashtra, 6 per cent in Karnataka and 2 per cent in Kerala were born outside the state.

These numbers were lower than what I expected. Though I surmise, they are perhaps still higher than historical numbers and I'd have

liked to see that data here. Also, it would have been useful to see how migration patterns have moved in other countries – especially China – so that we have some more benchmarks.

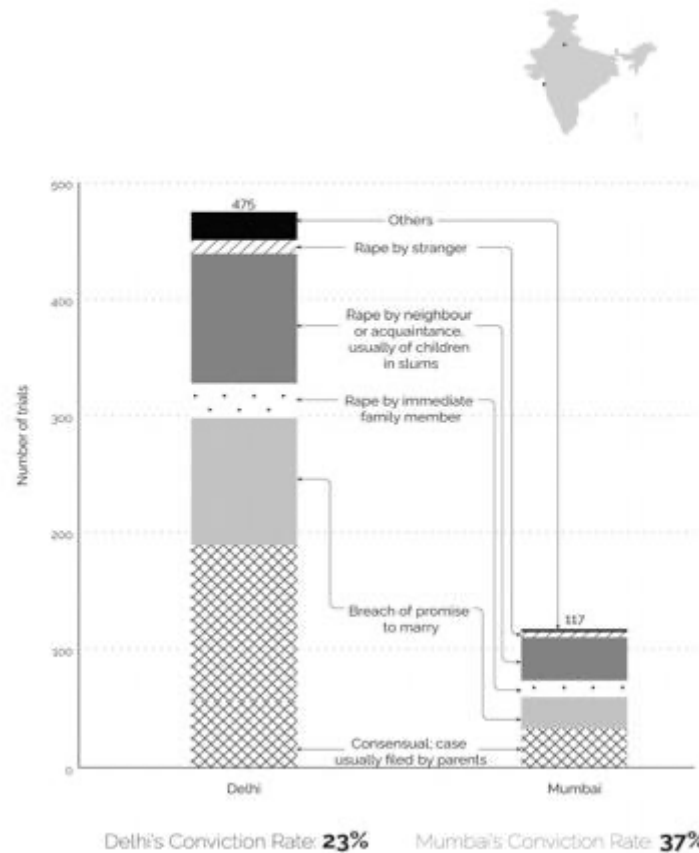
b. Crime against women.

The dominant narrative here is ‘stranger-danger’. Entire cities are labeled safe or unsafe based on a few gruesome cases or statistics that are reported in the news. Where do these statistics come from? They come from a critical police document whose veracity we take for granted: the FIR (First Information Report).

Rukmini decided to dig a bit deeper. In a powerful example of meticulous research, Rukmini examined all of the 600 judgements involving IPC Section 376 (which dealt with rape) from Delhi’s seven district courts for the year 2013.

Her findings are illuminating:

Figure 1.1: What one year of district court rulings in sexual assault trials showed



Source: Whole Numbers and Half Truths, Rukmini S, Page 16

Assault by strangers is a small percentage of the total cases. The highest share is for consensual cases where the parents file a false case against the husband/boy for eloping with/marrying their daughter. It's a sordid case of parental disapproval of inter-caste or inter-religious marriage. The details do *not* make for pleasant reading (emphasis mine):

In case after case, as well as in interviews with me, the behaviour of the families of these young consenting women was shocking: they arrived at the hotel or friend's house the couple had eloped to and dragged them home, they beat and even injured the couple (in one case breaking the young woman's spine), they threatened their own daughters and nieces with acid, they forced them to submit to invasive medical tests and in many cases, even to an abortion. Young women deposed about the suffering they faced at the hands of their parents—beatings, confinement, threats, being forced to undergo medical examinations, being forced to undergo abortions—even as they pleaded before the court they be allowed to stay with their husbands.

There are undoubtedly crimes taking place against the women here, but not the ones that are being prosecuted by the State.

Over years of journalistic writing, Rukmini has this well-honed ability to state all the facts plainly and then end with a gut-punch line like the one above. The book is peppered with several such lines.

2. For an emerging economy, India had a relatively robust statistical infrastructure

This surprised me:

The National Statistical Office (NSO) is in a sense the Indian Space Research Organisation, of India's statistical landscape; a Nehruvian edifice that established India as a country that punched far above its weight in the 1950s and 1960s. While the foundation of the statistical system in India was laid down by the British administration, the new government of independent India took quick and decisive steps to establish a statistical architecture that was bold and ambitious.

Apart from this book, I've been listening to podcast conversations ([this one](#) with Pramit Bhattacharya and [this one](#) with Rukmini) and didn't realise that India punched above its weight when it came to building its statistical infrastructure.

Unfortunately that edifice is [under some pressure in recent years](#) – hopefully things become better rather than worse.

3. But our on ground reporting, especially of crime, illnesses and other negative incidents, is poor

States with higher reported crime might actually be the ones doing a better job of ensuring full reporting, rather than being the ones that are the most unsafe, particularly for some types of crimes. People often use Kerala's high rates of reported crime, particularly against women, to criticise the state, former state police chief Jacob Punnoose pointed out recently. 'But what this shows is that with more female police recruitment, more women felt confident to approach the police. We should celebrate this'

The same logic applies to Covid data reporting. So we need to be careful before taking any government statistics at face value, especially those generated by administrative departments.

Engaging writing style

Apart from the several eye-opening insights in the book, I also enjoyed Rukmini's clear, understated and pleasant writing style.

1. A sense of balance in the voice

At a time when there's too much superficial, shrill and opinionated pieces masquerading as analysis, Rukmini's work offers nuance, balance and an even tone. Consider for example this line about crime reporting:

Alongside acts of great bravery and hard work in trying circumstances, there is also extreme venality in Indian police forces. And, alongside genuine crime, there are also complex sociological forces that drive people into police stations, forces that have little to do with true crime. In short, FIRs alone say too little.

2. Infusing life into the data with anecdotes

The book is filled with several anecdotes and examples that help you put a face to the data. For instance Chapter 1 opens with the heartbreaking story of Seema and Sameer who eloped to get married and faced disastrous consequences. Or the fascinating portraits of the two Chennai-based women who share their nuanced thinking on who they vote for and why. Or even this delightful little anecdote in the chapter on work:

After passing her Class XII exams from a government school, Anju came to me for help for a job. What sort of work do you want to do? I asked her. One in which I have to wear a salwar-kurta and carry a file to office every day, she told me.

In so many cases, the data comes out alive with these real-life examples.

In a later interview, I realised how conflicted Rukmini was about the addition of the 'human interest story' to 'humanise' her numbers. She says that her reticence comes from the worry that the addition of a human story can become a formulaic trope of its own.

I get that... but in this book, I felt that the stories added a lot of colour and helped me 'get' the data better.

3. Investigative journalism to suss out the truth behind data

As an ex-field reporter, Rukmini shares quite a few war stories from her experience. None of them are more striking than the 'Meow meow' drug story.

In 2013-14, the Mumbai police started making a lot of arrests under Section 328 of the IPC (causing hurt using a poisonous substance) for people selling a narcotic substance called mephedrone (street name: meow meow).

Over the next two years, as these cases came up for hearing in court, what do you think was the conviction rate? 40%? 60%?

It was zero.

All the accused were acquitted.

What was happening here? Based on Rukmini's investigation:

- The drug mephedrone was available cheaply and easily in Mumbai and was being peddled by many dealers
- But it was not yet a banned substance under the stringent Narcotics Act, despite pleas from the Mumbai police to the Central Agencies
- So the Mumbai police got creative. They booked the peddlers under a different law – Sec 328 of the Indian Penal Code
- That section was meant for people indulging in food poisoning (where the victim/s would be unaware) and not for drug dealing (where the buyers are aware and consenting)
- Since they were applying the wrong section, the police knew that they would not get any convictions in court. But they took the cynical view that "at least we'll put them in for the duration of the case"
- According to Rukmini, "*IPC 328 is a non-bailable offence; the accused in the cases I saw spent between one year and twenty months in custody. An analysis of their names shows that 119 of the 148 acquitted were Muslim.*"

She ends this section with this cautionary para:

For anyone looking at crime statistics of the time, as I was for what began as unrelated research on sexual assault FIRs in Mumbai, it would have seemed as if the city was awash with incidents of poisoning, mostly committed by Muslims, and the courts were failing victims. What would have remained hidden between the lines is that forming any assessment of India from police reports or from media reports of them is an exercise in futility—or worse, in deception.

You've been warned: Take official statistics with a massive pinch of salt.

	<p>What could be better</p> <p>In some cases I felt the book could do with more norms – historical and global. For instance this portion:</p> <p><i>The bulk of India's workforce is engaged in the 'informal' sector, meaning that they have little in terms of job protection, benefits and social security. Seven out of ten workers in the non-farm sector are in informal employment, seven out of ten salaried workers in jobs with no written contract and over half in jobs that give them no paid leave or social security benefits.</i></p> <p>I'd like to know what this number was earlier (maybe across the last few decades?) and also what are relevant global benchmarks. It would also be useful to see whether the share of formal workers has changed in certain sectors (e.g. the gig economy) over the last few years.</p> <p>Such quibbles aside, this is a fabulous book. If you really want to know your country – and why wouldn't you – you should read Rukmini's book.</p>
<p>'Making Numbers Count: The art and science of communicating numbers' by Chip Heath and Karla Starr</p>	<p>Great news – you and your best friend have won the lottery!</p> <p>You won a million dollars – but your friend is even luckier with a billion-dollar haul.</p> <p>The lottery organisers have only one condition though. You need to spend the money – at a rate of exactly \$50,000 per day (Maalamaal, anyone?).</p> <p>Can you <i>quickly</i> estimate how much longer will your friend's fortune last at this rate of spending?</p> <p>Sure, you can give the 'mathematical' answer – it will last for a 1000x of your time. But I'm asking about the actual number of days.</p>

Ok, here's a hint – your own windfall will last for... just a measly 20 days. (Man, not even a month!)

What about your friend's? How much time will her money last?

About 55 years.

That's right – almost one whole adult lifetime.

(Feeling a tad bit jealous?)

If that difference surprised you, welcome to the realisation – you don't really 'get' numbers as well as you think you do.

And if your job depends on communicating numbers (whose doesn't?), you need to read this book.

I've been reading Chip and Dan Heath's books since the seminal '**Made to Stick**'. Later works such as '**The Power of Moments**' and '**Upstream**' have also significantly influenced me.

But this book... I mean what do I say?

I feel that Chip (and his co-author, Karla Starr) thought, "Ok, Ravi is teaching this skill of storytelling and he deals with a lot of numbers. How about I spend several years (*I'm guessing?*) writing a book specifically about how to communicate numbers better? I'm fairly certain he would buy it."

You bet!

As soon as the book's launch announcement was made, in mid-Dec last year, I was among the first to register my purchase. And when it

was landed in my Kindle in mid-Jan this year, the book went straight to the top of my reading list.

And boy, is it good.

Here are some fascinating insights from this eye-opening book:

1. We don't really get numbers

Most primitive societies did not have the need to count beyond the fingers on their hands. And so the authors start with an important insight:

Here's a secret: nobody really understands numbers. Nobody. That's just a fact of being human. Our brains evolved to deal with very small numbers. We can recognize 1, 2, and 3 at a glance, up to 4 or 5 if we're lucky. You can get a sense of this from any kid's counting book; your brain shouts "3!" when you see a picture of 3 goldfish, no counting necessary. That's a process called subitizing, which our brains developed long before numerical systems were invented.

And despite all the math training we get, our ancestral hardware hasn't been upgraded yet:

So it was a great advance when humans developed additional tools for doing math—first, systems for counting (scratches on a stone, knots on string, bar codes); then numbers (455 or 455,000); then mathematics.

*But while our cultural math infrastructure has changed, our brains are still the same from a biological perspective. Even if we train a lot—and we do all the way up through college – **mathematics is a blisteringly new piece of high-tech software strapped on top of a clunky piece of hardware**. It can work, but it will never be our first instinct. Billions, trillions, millions, kajillions ... they all sound the same but describe wildly different realities. Our brains were designed to juggle 1, 2, 3, 4, and 5. After that, it's just "lots."*

2. We need to recognise numbers as a different language – and translate them for the audience

How would you explain the phrase “Aasman se gira, khajur mein atka” to a non-Hindi audience?

Clearly it cannot be “Fell from the sky, got stuck inside a date”.

You’d probably go with – “From one bad situation to another”

Or even better: “From the frying pan to the fire”.

On the face of it, “from the frying pan to the fire” seems nothing like “Aasman se gira, khajur mein atka”. But in essence, they are the same thing.

Chip and Karla have the same insight about numbers. Don’t think of numbers as a universal truth that everyone automatically ‘gets’.

Think of them as a foreign language, which needs translation.

This was the most valuable insight from the book for me:

There are many possible ways to translate a sentence or paragraph from one language to another. Some will better convey the meaning, some may be more precise, some may even be more beautiful. Well, the same is true of number translations.

The first part of the book establishes why we need to translate numbers, and also why the translation is more of an art than science.

The rest of the book is about the science – **how** do you communicate numbers better.

3. There are several tactics you can use to make your numbers talk

a. Convert it to human scale

For instance

Pre: A frog can leap several times its own body size.

*Post translation: If you were a basketball-playing frog, you would be able to leap **and dunk** the ball from the 3-point line ... actually, from the 3-point line around your opponent's basket!*

Or

Pre: The distance to the nearest solar system is 4.25 light-years.

Post translation: How far away is the nearest star from us? Well, imagine shrinking the solar system down to the size of a 10 pence coin. You leave the 10p at the goalpost of a soccer field and walk toward the goalpost at the other end of the field. When you reach it, drop another 10p to represent the solar system of our nearest neighbor, Proxima Centauri. Everything between the coins is just cold, dark space.

b. Use our comfort with understanding time – and the calendar

While we may not get large numbers, we do get large periods of time. Use that to your advantage.

Pre: The odds of winning the US Powerball lottery: 1 in 292,201,338

Post translation: Imagine having to guess which date someone is thinking of—any date between January 1 in the year 0001 (1 A.D.) and September 18... in the year 2667. If you match, you win the lottery prize.

Another one with the difference between million and billion:

Pre: A billion is thousand times a million.

Post translation: A million seconds is 12 days. A billion seconds is 32 years.

c. Leverage something humans have experienced

I loved this one:

Pre: There are a little more than 50 million people in England, and around 50 deaths each day via accidental causes (slipping in the tub; being swept away in a flooding river; falling from a ladder). The daily risk of dying there in an accident is roughly 1 in a million

Post translation: Imagine the entire Harry Potter series shelved in a library. Take the second volume, Harry Potter and the Chamber of Secrets off the shelf (it's always been your favorite), and you're left with 6 books, which together have approximately 1,000,000 words of text ... Now, pick one of the remaining volumes, open it to a random page, and draw a red X over a random word. Then replace that volume, and take the Chamber of Secrets with you to read in the cafe. Now if someone else entered the library and, without looking, picked a page in one of the volumes and put their finger down on a word, the chance of them picking the word with your red X is 1 in a million.

d. Make it concrete – let people visualise it

This one on inequality:

Pre: The wealthiest 1% of Americans own 31% of the wealth in the country. The top 10% own around 70%. And the bottom half own just 2%.

Post translation: Imagine an apartment building with 10 units on each floor and 100 in total. The richest person owns 31 apartments. Together the 10 wealthiest people in the building own 70 of the apartments. The poorest person shares ownership with everyone who is worth less than \$100,000. If that's you, then you and 49 others would share 2 apartments.

e. Leverage emotion

Even a number as simple as 7 years can be made emotional!

Pre: CFLs use a quarter of the electricity of standard bulbs and last for 7 years in between replacements compared with the "replace every year" cycle for typical bulbs.

Post translation: Replace your lights with CFLs when your child is learning how to walk. The next time you'd have to replace the bulb, your child would be in Year 3, learning about oxygen. The next time, they'd be applying for their provisional driver's licence.

I could go on and on, but you get the drift. The book is a rich treasure trove of examples and tactics of how to make numbers count. If your job depends on communicating numbers to drive change – Get. This. Book!

Minor quibble: Almost all the references and examples are written keeping a US audience in mind (which is understandable given the core audience). Time for an Indian version to be written then!

'Storyworthy' by Matthew Dicks

I've been reading books on the topic of storytelling for more than a decade now.

I wrote an #SOTD with my **top 13 books** to learn the various fascinating elements of the storytelling toolkit.

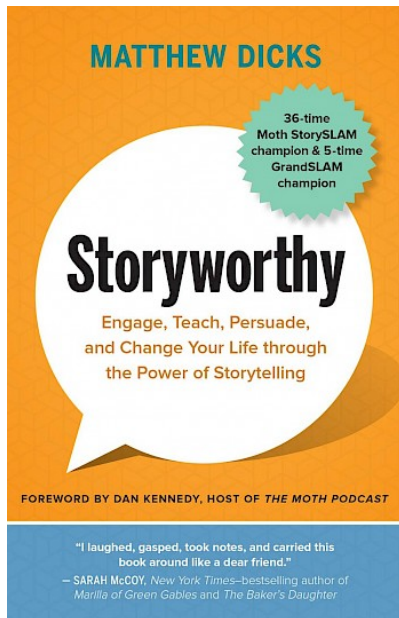


And over the years, my general impression was that I've essentially read most of the good stuff... (in fact I also wrote a Saturday email

listing **the books that you should not bother reading**). I basically thought – that’s it – there’s no seminal book that I haven’t yet read.

Boy was I wrong.

I was recommended ‘Storyworthy’ several months back by **Hrushit Shah**, a participant in one of my workshops.



I didn’t pick it up then – I thought it might either be dealing with fiction stories (not my cup of tea) or be similar to two other books I’ve read on the art of telling anecdotes (**Sell with a Story** by Paul Smith and **Putting Stories to Work** by Shawn Callahan).

But recently I came across a glowing review for Storyworthy in YouTube Creator **Ali Abdaal’s newsletter**. And I decided to give it a try. I’m so glad I did.

Storyworthy turned out to be the best book I've read about finding, crafting and delivering **personal** stories... true stories from your own life. Stories about transformational moments. Stories that can help you grow. Stories that can help others connect with you.

The author: Matthew Dicks became popular because of a storytelling event called The Moth. **The Moth** is a NY based organisation dedicated to the art and craft of telling true personal stories. A flagship event of theirs is the Moth StorySLAM, which is an open-mic storytelling competition. **Matthew Dicks** is a 36-time Moth StorySLAM winner and 5-time GrandSLAM winner.

Matthew is the real deal. He just *gets* storytelling – as I had profiled with an example on a **previous #SOTD**, he can make you laugh and cry in the same story.

He also thinks deeply about the subject – and is able to share several higher-order insights (all extracts from the book):

1. A personal story must reflect change

Your story must reflect change over time. A story cannot simply be a series of remarkable events. You must start out as one version of yourself and end as something new.

2. Every great story is about a five-second moment of transformation

Every great story ever told is essentially about a five-second moment in the life of a human being, and the purpose of the story is to bring that moment to the greatest clarity possible.

What are five-second moments

...five-second moments are the moments in your life when something fundamentally changes forever. You fall in love. You fall out of

love. You discover something new about yourself or another person. Your opinion on a subject dramatically changes. You find forgiveness. You reach acceptance. You sink into despair. You grudgingly resign. You're drowned in regret. You make a life-altering decision. Choose a new path. Accomplish something great. Fail spectacularly.

These five-second moments are what your story is moving towards. Which brings me to idea #3

3. Put in place a system to capture 'storyworthy' moments

The first section of the book offers simple, practical tools to trigger story memories. for example an activity called 'Homework for Life':

I assigned myself Homework for Life. This is what I did: I decided that at the end of every day, I'd reflect upon my day and ask myself one simple question: If I had to tell a story from today – a five-minute story onstage about something that took place over the course of this day – what would it be? As benign and boring and inconsequential as it might seem, what was the most storyworthy moment from my day?

4. Your beginning should be the opposite of your ending (but also be really close to it)

A good story should begin well – and Matthew has several insights on how you can do that.

Once you've distilled your five-second moment down to its essence, ask yourself: What is the opposite of your five-second moment? Simply put, the beginning of the story should be the opposite of the end. Find the opposite of your transformation, revelation, or realization, and this is where your story should start. This is what creates an arc in your story. This is how a story shows change over time. I was once this, but now I am this. I once thought this, but now I think this. I once felt this, but now I feel this. But hang on – there is another element which should start as *close* to the end as possible:
I also try to start my story as close to the end as possible (a rule Kurt Vonnegut followed when writing short stories). I want my stories to be as temporally limited as possible. I strive for simplicity at all times. By starting as close to the end as possible, we shorten our stories.

	<p>My interpretation: In terms of time and place start as close to the end as possible. In terms of your own transformation/change start as far from the end as possible.</p> <p>In addition, Matthew shares several other practical tips to make your story compelling and engaging from start to finish. For every tool and technique he shares, he offers several examples, mostly from his own stories told on the Moth stage.</p> <p>Storyworthy is by far the best primer I've read on the art of the personal story. A must read, if you are interested in improving this skill.</p>
<p>'The Etymologicon: A Circular Stroll Through the Hidden Connections of the English Language' by Mark Forsyth</p>	<p>I'm a huge fan of Mark Forsyth's work – I had discovered his writing through the peerless 'Elements of Eloquence' – perhaps the most entertaining non-fiction book I've read.</p> <p>I had similar high high hopes from The Etymologicon... which is fabulous to be sure, but just not as stellar as 'Elements...'</p> <p>The book consists of a series of small, 'snackable' chapters where Mark picks up everyday words and goes on a global romp to uncover its origin story.</p> <p>Mark is obsessed with this – so much so that he warns you not to trigger the obsession by asking him a question about the same:</p> <p><i>Occasionally people make the mistake of asking me where a word comes from. They never make this mistake twice.</i></p> <p>That dry British wit constantly shines through. For instance:</p> <p><i>Pocahontas was a princess of the Powhatan tribe, which lived in Virginia. Of course, the Powhatan tribe didn't know they lived in Virginia. They thought they lived in Tenakomakah, and so the English thoughtfully came with guns to explain their mistake.</i></p> <p>And this:</p> <p><i>Myles Coverdale was an early Protestant who believed in principle that the Bible should be translated into English. He decided that, as nobody else seemed to be doing it, he had better get on with the job himself, and he didn't let the tiny detail that he knew no Latin, Greek or Hebrew get in his way. This is the kind of can-do attitude that is sadly lacking in modern biblical scholarship.</i></p>

Let us now move our attention to some of the cool word-origin stories that the book reveals. Here are 8 great examples:

1. How is toxin – the word for poison – derived from the Greek word for bows?

A toxophilite is somebody who loves archery. The reason for this is that toxin comes from toxon, the Greek word for bow, and toxic comes from toxikos, the Greek word for pertaining to archery. This is because in ancient warfare it was common practice to dip your arrowheads in poison. The two ideas were so connected in the Greek mind that toxon became toxin.

2. The origin story of the word quisling (which means someone who collaborates with an enemy occupying force – based on a Norwegian guy who partnered with the Nazis during WW2). In the book, Mark quotes this superb paragraph from The Times – check out the last line:

Major Quisling has added a new word to the English language. To writers, the word Quisling is a gift from the gods. If they had been ordered to invent a new word for traitor ... they could hardly have hit upon a more brilliant combination of letters. Aurally it contrives to suggest something at once slippery and tortuous. Visually it has the supreme merit of beginning with a Q, which (with one august exception) has long seemed to the British mind to be a crooked, uncertain and slightly disreputable letter, suggestive of the questionable, the querulous, the quavering of quaking quagmires and quivering quicksands, of quibbles and quarrels, of queasiness, quackery, qualms and quail.

3. How pisces became fishes

Ps in Latin turn to Fs in German (and hence in many English words), which is how paternal pisces became fatherly fishes.

4. What's the connect between a popular programming language and an iconic British comedy sketch group

Monty Python is, for reasons best known to nobody, rather popular with computer programmers. There's even a programming language

called Python, based on their sketches.

5. What is common with something women put on their eyes and something that intoxicates you:

Alcohol comes from al (the) kuhul, which was a kind of make-up. Indeed, some ladies still use kohl to line their eyes. As kohl is an extract and a dye, alcohol started to mean the pure essence of anything.

6. On that topic, the link between the Hindi word for 'five' and a cool cocktail:

...punch comes from the Hindi word for five: panch. That's because, technically, a punch should contain five different ingredients: spirits, water, lemon juice, sugar and spice.

7. A fascinating story behind the words bunkum and debunk

...a Congressman called Felix Walker stood up, cleared his throat, began to speak, and wouldn't stop. He went on and on until people started to get fidgety, and on and on until people started to get annoyed, and on and on until people started to jeer, and on and on until people started to tap him on the shoulder and tell him to stop, and on and on until there was a small crowd round him demanding to know why he wouldn't stop. Felix Walker replied that he was not speaking to Congress, his speech was for the benefit of his constituency back home: he was making 'a speech for Buncombe'.

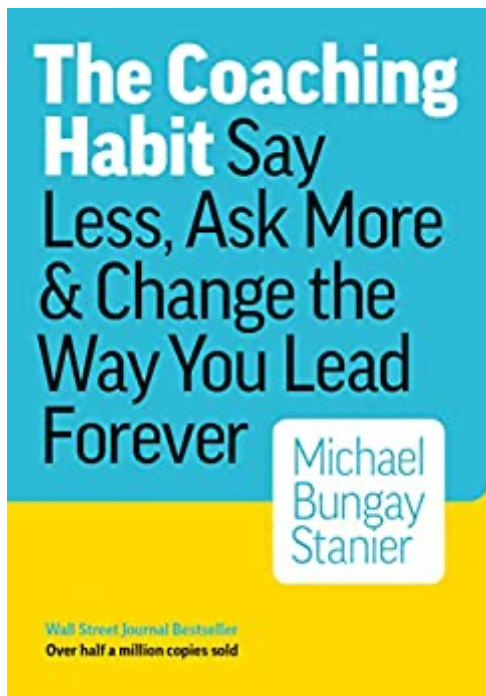
It was such an ingenious idea (and such a common practice in all democracies) that the phrase caught on, and speaking to Buncombe soon got shortened to speaking bunkum and then just plain bunkum, which needs to be debunked.

**Buncombe in North Carolina was his constituency*

8. The origin of oxymoron

Incidentally, moron meant dull, but in Greek oxy meant sharp. Many, many chapters ago we saw how oxygen got its name because it generated acids, and the oxy in oxymoron has the same root. So an oxymoron is a sharp softness.

	<p>A fascinating read with several a-ha moments!</p>
<p>'The Coaching Habit' by Michael Bungay Stanier</p>	<p>Let's face it – we love giving advice.</p> <p>We love it when someone comes to us with a problem and asks us for our opinion. Heck, even if they don't come with a problem, our uber-helpful mind is itching to convert the conversation into an unsolicited advice-giving session.</p> <p>Here's how Michael Bungay Stanier, the author of The Coaching Habit, puts it:</p> <p><i>We've all got a deeply ingrained habit of slipping into the advice-giver/expert/answer-it/solve-it/fix-it mode. Even though we don't really know what the issue is, or what's going on for the person, we're quite sure we've got the answer she needs.</i></p> <p>But that does not help. At least with adults, who learn and change best when they figure out the solution by themselves. Which is the whole mantra of the 'coaching approach' to teaching something... (It is something I personally struggle with by the way).</p> <p>Now, there are several other books on coaching. Some of the well-known ones include the bestselling 'Trillion Dollar Coach' (on Silicon Valley legend, Bill Campbell) and Paddy Upton's 'Barefoot Coach'.</p> <p>But while these are essentially stories of these coaches, with a ton of coaching advice blended in, they aren't written as a coaching manual per se.</p> <p>'The Coaching Habit' is.</p>



I came to know about this book from Gwyn Wansbrough's excellent [Twitter feed](#) and [newsletter](#). (Side note: Gwyn runs a course called [Breakthrough Facilitation](#), which I attended earlier this year. It has significantly changed my approach to training and facilitation!).

As soon as I started reading the book, I realised – OMG, this is one of those rare books which are simple yet deeply insightful and practical.

For instance, Michael is clear that he does not want coaching to be seen as a high-stakes, scheduled half-yearly event:

You can coach someone in ten minutes or less. And in today's busy world, you have to be able to coach in ten minutes or less. Coaching should be a daily, informal act, not an occasional, formal "It's Coaching Time!" event.

How do you do that? Michael makes it really simple and distils it to just seven key questions that you need to understand and use as a

coach:

Coaching is simple. In fact, this book's Seven Essential Questions give you most of what you need.

What are the seven questions? Well I don't want to reveal them to you – it's fun to discover the questions for yourself.

But let's take an example of one of the most powerful questions: the AWE question or 'And What Else?'

When someone's nudging a new idea to the fore, exploring new boundaries of courage and possibility, hold the space and deepen the potential by asking, "And what else might be possible?"

...as you ask, "And what else?" the goal isn't to generate a bazillion options. It's to see what ideas that person already has (while effectively stopping you from leaping in with your own ideas). If you get three to five answers, then you've made great progress indeed.

Here's another example of a simple, practical tip: Avoid the 'Why' question.

Yes, there's a place for asking "Why?" in organizational life. And no, it's not while you're in a focused conversation with the people you're managing. Here are two good reasons: You put them on the defensive. Get the tone even slightly wrong and suddenly your "Why...?" come across as "What the hell were you thinking?" It's only downhill from there. You're trying to solve the problem. You ask why because you want more detail. You want more detail because you want to fix the problem. And suddenly you're back in the vicious circles of overdependence and overwhelm.

This was surprising for me, because we are always taught to deep-dive into the root cause – the 5 Whys, as it were.

Instead, Michael suggests a different approach:

When I'm tempted to ask them why...

INSTEAD OF... Beginning the question with "Why..."

I WILL... Reframe the question so it starts with "What..."

So, as some examples, instead of "Why did you do that?" ask "What were you hoping for here?" Instead of "Why did you think this was a good idea?" ask "What made you choose this course of action?" Instead of "Why are you bothering with this?" ask "What's important for you here?"

The book is filled with several such simple yet powerful examples and questions. Questions that can really open up your conversations.

	<p>Questions that can lead you to the nub of any complex issue. And most importantly, questions that can leave your audience feeling empowered and energised.</p> <p>Holding back the temptation to give advice (especially when someone is asking for it) is one of the most difficult skills to build in life. This book is a great manual in how to do so.</p>
<p>The Art of Gathering: How we Meet and Why it Matters' by Priya Parker</p>	<p>In a packed room, two senior executives are facing off each other, white towels on their shoulders. Crouching behind each of them is a 'coach' whispering instructions and massaging their shoulders. Rousing music from the movie Rocky blares from the speakers. And the two leaders get ready to start the fight.</p> <p>Of words.</p> <p>***</p> <p>In one of my previous jobs, I was part of an accomplished leadership team – folks who were all highly qualified, value-driven and strongly committed to the cause of youth skilling and jobs.</p> <p>But over a period of time, differences cropped up on how to achieve that goal. These got complicated due to our differing personalities and world-views. Clear 'camps' emerged. Conversations became increasingly heated. Review meetings were testy, unproductive. It was not an ideal scenario.</p> <p>I know what some of you might be thinking – Ravi, this is a common occurrence across many workplaces!</p> <p>I agree. But I want to focus on one specific event which I view as a missed opportunity.</p> <p>Sometime in 2013 (I think), we got a couple of senior leadership facilitators to run an intervention. They took the entire leadership group (around 11-12 of us) on a 2-day offsite, where we could talk about the contentious points and figure out a way to find common ground and</p>

bridge the differences.

Or at least that's what I *thought* was the objective.

When I went in to that offsite, I had very high expectations. I wanted the facilitators to put us in a safe space and get us to open up with each other. Bring out the differences in a candid way. Disagree without being disagreeable. Share our own perspectives and world-views. Talk about *why* we thought our approach was right.

In short, that event could have been transformational. It could have gotten us to resolve our deepest differences. Build the foundation of a stronger, more cohesive leadership team. And been a turning point in our organisation's history.

It failed spectacularly.

Due to various reasons - including a failure on our part to take the initiative - the facilitators did nothing of the sort that I expected. They gave us some platitudes about leadership, got us to participate in random exercises and, bizarrely, even went into some aspects of gifted children and human body aura. (That was seriously weird).

Anyway, my overall point: Gatherings matter.

When you get people together, it offers a wonderful opportunity to make a real difference. To examine our deepest assumptions. To get to know each other better. And to get epic stuff done.

And we often blow that opportunity.

This book is a great primer on how to maximise the potential of such gatherings.

[Priya Parker](#) is a conflict resolution expert - she gets people together, especially those who have serious differences, and facilitates an open discussion.

This book is not just about conflict resolution though - it is about all types of gatherings. It lays down a roadmap on how to deliberately create and host meaningful all kinds of get-togethers.

One fascinating idea Priya shares is that of creating 'good controversy':

Good controversy is the kind of contention that helps people look more closely at what they care about, when there is danger but also real benefit in doing so. To embrace good controversy is to embrace the idea that harmony is not necessarily the highest, and certainly not the only, value in a gathering.

...good controversy rarely happens on its own. It needs to be designed for and given structure. Because, almost by definition, controversy arises from what people care enough about to argue over, most gatherings are marred either by unhealthy peace or by unhealthy heat. Either no one is really saying anything that they actually think, or you end up with what I call the "Thanksgiving problem": a total free-for-all of pent-up grievances that often brings out tears and a screaming match...

Here's a powerful example from the book. In one gathering of leaders from an architecture firm, Priya 'architected' a good controversy. Here's what happened:

...the question they (the architecture firm's leaders) were debating: Did they want to remain a bricks-and-mortar architecture firm, or did they want to morph into an experience-design firm? There was serious disagreement in the room on that question, which is why they asked me to orchestrate the gathering. But as the conversation got under way, you wouldn't know it. Everyone around the table was smiling, friendly, and polite. Each time a partner would go out on a limb and dip a toe into the underlying controversy, she would quickly withdraw. I tried to redirect the group to what divided rather than united them. "Let's get back to Anne's point," I'd suggest. But they were a sophisticated group and were well practiced at what I realized was one of the firm's dominant norms: avoiding anything that could stir the pot. The emotions I knew to be in the room were not surfacing. I knew that I would soon have to try a new approach, lest the whole meeting come to nothing.

This, this was the moment where Priya shows her skill. She had the sense to understand that the group is being nice and harmonious but

not productive. And she realised that they need to be pushed and prodded to debate deeper issues using any means necessary!

And so she decided to do something drastic:

So with the help of my extremely open-minded client, an executive who was not an architect himself but worked for them, we began to scheme at lunch, while everyone was away. In their absence, he and I restructured the room, gathered some towels, and located some Rocky music on YouTube. We were preparing for a cage match.

When the architects returned, they found two giant posters. One extolled a character called the Brain, the other a character called the Body. Each poster featured an actual wrestler's body, onto which one of the architects' heads had been hastily photoshopped. We had chosen two architects we knew to be charismatic, playful, and eloquent. Both of them immediately erupted in laughter when they saw what we had put up. We built on their surprise and didn't give them much of a chance to think. I jumped into the middle of the crowd and announced that there was now going to be a cage match.

I laid out the rules: In Round 1, each wrestler would be given three minutes to make the strongest argument for his side. The Body would have to argue why the firm should absolutely remain focused on the physical, on bricks-and-mortar architecture, on building buildings, for the next hundred years. The Brain would have to make the case for becoming a design firm, an increasingly popular if ethereal creature that took on jobs like crafting the signage within a hospital or organizing the flow of processes in an airport but didn't necessarily build things. It was a choice between moving with the times and sticking to their core talent.

The outcome - an open, much-needed debate that made people choose what really matters to them:

For the next twenty minutes, thanks to the willingness of the two wrestler-architects, this stuffy, buttoned-up, conservative, genteel group barked, hissed, laughed, taunted, and listened as two architects made two strong, interesting, sharp, and radically different cases for two very different futures. When certain architects were waffling, trying to claim a spot between the two fighters, it was their previously polite peers who called them out: "You have to choose!" The match was confrontational, heated, and argumentative, and it was exactly what we needed.

If you must know, the Body won.

I wish we had someone like Priya facilitating our offsite way back in 2013.

Imagine the number of missed opportunities to make a real difference because we don't think through how to design and conduct our crucial meetings.

Of course, in such events, the facilitator needs a ton of skill to ensure that the heated discussions during such moments does not make the situation worse. It might be advisable to run such an initiative only under the watchful eyes of a trained expert.

Another powerful idea in the book is that of 'generous authority' - where you take charge (it's not a democracy) but do it for the sake of others (generously):

The kinds of gatherings that meaningfully help others are governed by what I call generous authority. A gathering run on generous authority is run with a strong, confident hand, but it is run selflessly, for the sake of others. Generous authority is imposing in a way that serves your guests. It spares them from the chaos and anxiety

From formal to informal gatherings

As mentioned, this book is not only about formal meetings - it applies to all types of gatherings, including family get-togethers, office parties, friends meet-ups etc.

Often when it comes to planning most informal parties, we focus on the tangible stuff: The food (super important), the drinks (even more important), the music, the seating, the house-cleaning... and leave the 'intangible' things to chance. We just expect people to mill with each other, have conversations, sing, dance, eat, drink and then leave.

That is such a missed opportunity. I feel that we should put as much, if not more effort on thinking through the intangible stuff. Of course, that does not mean we need to plan out every minute of the guests' time in the party. But leaving it all entirely to unstructured conversations and music/dance is also not the right way to do it.

	<p>What might be an example of a planned fun activity for a party with close friends or family? I highly recommend an event like the 'Story Housie' game which can transform such gatherings.</p> <p>***</p> <p>Overall, Priya's book is filled with several examples and ideas for making your gatherings more meaningful.</p> <p>Fair warning: The book is not the most engaging or insightful to read throughout. I found myself skipping parts and in some cases entire chapters. But its biggest value is in making us realise that gatherings have a life of their own, and it is the host's responsibility to give it shape and direction in order to achieve the audience's shared goals.</p> <p>For those who may not find time for the book, this TED Talk by Priya offers a good summary of her ideas.</p> <p>Hat/tip: Thanks to Gwyn Wansbrough for the recommendation.</p>
<p>'How to be Perfect: The Correct Answer to Every Moral Question' by Michael Schur with Todd May</p>	<p>Michael Schur is a highly successful, Emmy-award winning writer/co-creator of several US sitcoms including: The Office, Parks and Recreation, A Good Place, and perhaps my favourite, Brooklyn Nine-Nine.</p> <p>A sitcom writer authoring a book on philosophy? How does that work, you may wonder?</p> <p>Well sometimes, to write about a complicated subject, all you need are three things: basic intelligence, great writing skills and a ton of curiosity. And Michael has all three, in spades.</p> <p>Mike graduated Phi Beta Kappa from Harvard University in 1997, with a B.A. major in English. So he's got the smarts. He's written a mountain of stuff for demanding TV shows, so he's got that writing experience under the belt. And his relentless curiosity and admirable moral compass, which shine through on every page, make him eminently suited for this endeavour.</p> <p>So I'd been waiting for a book like this for a long time. I'm interested in philosophy, but did not have the patience to dig through dense, difficult documents that are a chore to understand. I did try some books which were supposed to be introductory texts, but didn't get</p>

anywhere.

Thankfully, Mike has done the incredibly hard work of reading the source texts of several philosophical tomes for us - and then distilled the essence of the different approaches into one readable book.

He first shares *why* we should read philosophy - to make better, more deliberate decisions that come from a place of awareness.

Most people think of themselves as "good," and would like to be thought of as "good." Consequently, many (given the choice) would prefer to do a "good" thing instead of a "bad" thing. But it's not always easy to determine what is good or bad in this confusing, pretzel-twisty world, full of complicated choices and pitfalls and booby traps...

...this book hopes to boil down the whole confusing morass into four simple questions that we can ask ourselves whenever we encounter any ethical dilemma, great or small: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? Is there something we could do that's better? Why is it better?

Once he establishes the need for learning philosophy, the rest of the book dives into different philosophical approaches (mostly by taking a historical approach to the subject) along with colourful descriptions of the people who came up with them.

There are several reasons why Mike's book is a great read. Apart from the subject matter itself, what I enjoyed is the funny, relatable and concrete approach he takes to the subject. Here are some specific elements I loved about the book.

1. Relatable examples throughout

Mike introduces some of the most esoteric philosophical approaches and then applies them, not to solve major existential questions such as religion or democracy or capitalism..., but instead to answer simple (almost trivial) questions, such as:

- After a visit to a shopping mall, should I return the shopping cart back to where they are stored, or leave it near my car?

- Should I buy a new phone, when there's so much poverty around me?
- Should I lie to my friend that I like her ugly dress?
- We've Done Some Good Deeds, and Given a Bunch of Money to Charity, and We're Generally Really Nice and Morally Upright People, So Can We Take Three of These Free Cheese Samples from the Free Cheese Sample Plate at the Supermarket Even Though It Clearly Says "One Per Customer"

The idea is that philosophy can be used on simple everyday issues too.

(Incidentally many of these questions figure as Chapter names! Essentially Mike is clear that his focus is on *application* not theory for theory's sake)

2. Everyday language

I loved this instance of how Mike transitions from utilitarianism/consequentialism to the means-focused ideas of Immanuel Kant. (Utilitarianism? Kant? I know, I know. I'm name-dropping here. But that's how "smart" I feel after reading the book).

what if we could go back to that Universe Goodness Accountant from the introduction, who tsk-tsked us for all the bad results we got, and say, "Hey, lady—we don't care if our day of good deeds got all screwed up, because we meant to do good things and only our intentions determine our moral worth"? Wouldn't that feel good, to rub it in her face a little? Buckle up, people. It's (Immanuel) Kant time.

3. Humour that shines through!

I was chuckling reading this:

It's estimated that less than a third of what he (Aristotle) actually wrote has survived, but it covers the following subjects: ethics, politics, biology, physics, math, zoology, meteorology, the soul, memory, sleep and dreams, oratory, logic, metaphysics, politics, music, theater, psychology, cooking, economics, badminton, linguistics, politics, and aesthetics. That list is so long I snuck "politics" in there three times without you even noticing, and you didn't so much as blink when I claimed he wrote about "badminton," which definitely didn't exist in the

fourth century BCE.

4. Insightful lines that make you think and ponder the implications

"Should I tell the truth?" is one of the most common ethical dilemmas we face. Most of us don't enjoy misleading people, but the gears of society do mesh more smoothly if we grease them with white lies.

The tussle between individualistic and collective societies:

consider for a second his (Rene Descartes) famous Enlightenment formulation Cogito, ergo sum—the aforementioned "I think, therefore I am"—which, again, is one of the very foundations of Western thought. When we place it next to this ubuntu formulation—"I am, because we are"—well, man oh man, that's a pretty big difference.

5. Humanising lofty philosophers, poking fun at their eccentricities and making them relatable in present-day terms with analogies

We have now arrived at the second of our three main Western philosophical schools: utilitarianism, most famously developed by British philosophers Jeremy Bentham (1748–1832) and John Stuart Mill (1806– 1873), two deeply weird dudes.

Interestingly, utilitarianism is popular currently, given that Sam-Bankman Fried or SBF (the crypto billionaire who had a very public fall from grace) was [touted to be a star adherent of this philosophy](#).

Moving on, here's Mike describing the dour philosopher, Immanuel Kant:

Perhaps what we need is a real stickler. A stern hardass who crosses his arms disapprovingly when we equivocate. A no-nonsense Germanic dad who will look at our moral report card, see five A's and one A-minus, and ask: "What happened with the A-minus?" We need Immanuel Kant, and the philosophical theory known as deontology.

Here's a couple of analogies Mike uses to describe why Kant was such a big deal:

Whether you agree or not, Kant's hard-core brain-based theory was a seismic event in Western philosophy; his monumental influence

can be understood only when you see how many contemporary philosophers worked from his source material. He's sort of like Hitchcock in film, or maybe Run-DMC in hip-hop: he had a massive influence on those who came after him.

'How to be Perfect' is a highly recommended and essential 'quick start guide' to the fascinating world of philosophy.