

# Finding the Creative Affordance in Life

Roger Greenhalgh



Roger works for Jisc<sup>1</sup> and helps educational leaders make strategic use of ICT in the operations and development of their organisations. He started messing with computers in the mid-'70s and was an early adopter of IT in the classrooms of the '80s. An entrepreneur in the '90s DotCom boom and subsequent Ed Tech enthusiast in universities and colleges, mentorship with IT innovators seems to be his forté.

The year was 2006; my son and I were at the tail end of delivering the goods for a multi-university development project we'd been working on together (an online Knowledge Exchange platform). The website code development was done, the initial content was mostly in place, and it was now at the stage of just fixing the bugs.

There was no new project on the horizon. The summer was looming and gaining and it was becoming increasingly unlikely that we would be doing any more development work until the Autumn term. We were not good at doing nothing. If there isn't an obvious challenge, then we try and seek one out. Curiosity whispers constantly in the ear. As Richard Bach once said<sup>2</sup>, "Every problem comes with a gift in its hands - we seek problems because we need their gifts."

That same curiosity is also something that feeds innovators and networkers to sniff the merest whiff of opportunity: a possible technique; a different view; a better tool; an unexpected benefit. All are earmarked and linked into that back-catalogue of loose connections to resources and routes that "just might come in handy someday".



*It might come in handy?*

Our core project had been using web-based maps, with expensive licensing. Google Maps were a new thing, and suspiciously open about licensing. We also wanted to try using SMS texts to update a website or send automated alerts. So, we needed a low-risk guinea-pig to try these. Serendipity brought us into contact (outside of work) with some chaps who were trying to fundraise for Mercy Corps by organising cheap and cheerful rally teams from the UK to Mongolia. We offered to build online mapping into their website so that the position of teams on the overland drive to Mongolia could be updated regularly and automatically by SMS text messages. They were very grateful and accepted our offer. Thank you, serendipity, for the grateful guinea-pig.

When people are looking for creative affordance they walk around with their eyes and ears wide open - their radar ever alert for inspiration from what emerges through the circumstances of their life. I cannot pretend that the next steps came through any focused research. The maps and SMS updates had been a good idea hatched in a pub in Brick Lane one evening. From completely left-field came two other stimuli - firstly, Ewan McGregor and Charlie Borman's TV programme<sup>3</sup> "The Long Way Round" documented their motorcycle journey overland from the UK to Vladivostok, (recorded by a film crew), and secondly, a

<sup>1</sup> Jisc <http://www.jisc.ac.uk>

<sup>2</sup> Richard Bach, Illusions [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusions\\_\(Bach\\_novel\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Illusions_(Bach_novel))

<sup>3</sup> Long Way Round <http://longwayround.com/>

chance viewing of a YouTube video of an old cinema classic, the 40-minute London to Brighton train journey captured by sequential time-lapse photographs and replayed at high speed in just 4 minutes<sup>4</sup>. Connect both these concepts together and one has the next and obvious challenge - how could one also record the 3 week journey from London to Ulaanbaatar by road with a webcam, and condense it into just a few hours?

The curiosity seeds had been sown and were now germinating profusely. Within a matter of days, not only had we built the prototype map and SMS service, but we'd also decided to be a rally team, too, and record the journey. We bought a decrepit Fiat Panda 4x4 through Ebay for £300, and suddenly, this opened the floodgates to a whole new set of *off-piste* challenges, including the time-lapse video<sup>5</sup>.



*£300 from Ebay - needed a bit of reinforcing before we took to the Eastern roads (or lack of them)*

Everything so far was about technical challenge. We found ways to tackle the data capture; we found ways to re-engineer the vehicle to cope with challenging terrain, heat, dust, vibration, likely malfunctions, navigation, supplies and fundamentals of survival. The Mongol Rally<sup>6</sup> is, after all, completely unsupported. The organisers help you to get the visas, throw a launch party and (if you make it), an arrival bash, and the initial camaraderie helps you to believe in the quest. The rest is up to you. The route, the risks, and whatever your chosen reality.

We talked with the previous year's participants, and from that learned which spares to carry. We learned a few basic phrases of Russian, the most useful of which proved to be "Just a little" (as a precursor to vodka) and "I'm sorry", as a reflection on almost any misunderstood or confusing situation. We also knew that at internal Eastern Block checkpoints, having a selection of "presents" available for distribution would come in handy - and thus had scoured the local charity



*A makeshift Fiat Panda trailer combo seemed like a good idea at the time*

shops to assemble a cache of small, light, inexpensive items which were either quintessentially Western European (for high kudos value), or else incredibly useful. Most of these saved our bacon in unpredictable and completely unexpected ways.

Our journey began in London in late July of 2006, and over the next four weeks we travelled over 4,000 miles across Western and Eastern Europe, through Poland, Ukraine and Russia and onward across the steppes of western Kazakhstan. Our sights were originally set on reaching Mongolia, but circumstances changed, and we changed tack, abandoning the vehicle and returning by rail through Russia, weary, weather-worn and wiser, and hugely fulfilled.

<sup>4</sup> BBC Interlude – London to Brighton in 4 minutes <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P7GXWuTwkF8>

<sup>5</sup> Time lapse video – From the Midlands to Mongolia <http://ofi.openfields.org.uk/1.10020290>

<sup>6</sup> The Mongol Rally <http://www.theadventurists.com/mongol-rally/>



By the time we had reached Kiev we'd ditched 90% of our spares. The trailer hitch had sheared off through extreme vibration on the backroads of Lower Silesia, so we abandoned the trailer, along with many of our spares.



*At the entrance to Chernobyl*

We piled too much from the lost trailer onto the roof-rack, and as a result of the added weight, later broke a leaf-spring somewhere in mid-Ukraine. We had kept lots of duct tape and spare tyres, and I'm glad that we did. In Kazakhstan, the most useful of our diminishing tools proved to be a 4-pound lump hammer... we would occasionally stop and hammer the wheel-rims back into shape on them before their tyres came off on the punishingly rough desert roads. We had earlier bribed our way with "gifts" into the first and second Chernobyl "exclusion" zones, but one of the finest exchanges made was with a Russian border guard keen on extorting \$75 (yes, dollars, not roubles, he had insisted) from us for allegedly not stopping fast enough at his barrier. He settled for a second-hand copy of a Monty Python's *Life of Brian* DVD, which he was overjoyed with. (£3.00 from a Shropshire charity shop.)

We never got to Mongolia - we had lost the brakes and three out of five of the gears by the time we'd reached the arid shores of the diminishing Aral Sea. With the help of some Kazakh truckers, we had rebuilt the rear suspension using parts from an abandoned Russian Uaz - which kept us going for another thousand miles. We had fashioned replacement rubber suspension gaiters from scraps of truck inner-tube by the roadside. Yet eventually there comes the realisation that the destination wasn't important any more. Discretion is the better part of valour. We donated the remnants of the car to the fire-station mechanic in Zhasaly, and a few days later caught the stopping train on the long haul back through Almaty to Moscow, tired, grubby but fulfilled.



*The best improvised shower ever! Heated by the sun and made from military aircraft bits. The shower head was made from a perforated yoghurt pot*



*Rebuilding the suspension*



We had started out as a father-and-son team, but this entire escapade was a complete leveller. We chose our own route, regularly re-adapted as conditions imposed, not really wishing to convoy with other teams - happier to meet up spontaneously and unexpectedly, exchanging experiences, plans and possibilities over a beer. It was easy enough to spot a fellow traveller in some of the townships en route, and the passing of other recent travellers was an easy snippet to pick up on the local roadside grapevine. I don't recall us arguing, though certainly there were some robust discussions about how best to tackle some issue. I particularly recall many, many formative moments, for each of us, coming to terms with so many lifestyles and



*The long walk home*

expectations and ghosts of the recent past, historical, political, and environmental, through the places and people and desolate or anachronistic places we encountered. The Majdanek extermination camp<sup>7</sup>, the forsaken streets of Pripiat<sup>8</sup> (the Chernobyl dormitory township), the abandoned ships of the Aral Sea<sup>9</sup>, the Bykonur<sup>10</sup> space launch pads, the Kazakh salt lagoons<sup>11</sup>.

In each of these (and many other places) we kept encountering people who had somehow through necessity and circumstance absorbed these places into their everyday lives, their work, their environs. We stopped and talked (or at times drew figures, “rich pictures”, on beer mats or in the dust and dirt), and many of those dialogues caused each of us much reflection and re-processing whilst bouncing along across the endless Steppes.

My last memory of leaving the abandoned car with its proud recipient in Zhasaly was his most favoured choice of scavengings. We had relinquished socket sets and car jacks (all of which seemed useful to his trade) but his most prized gift was a knife, fork and spoon, which he proudly displayed in this shirt pocket, a symbol perhaps of globalisation of aspiration, turned so that its Swedish manufacturer’s embossed name was visible outermost -IKEA.



*The final great giveaway, in Zhasaly*

Paradoxically, I’ve since used that same word in a different context... as an acronym for progression through a competency framework - *Introduced, Knowledgeable, Expert, Able*. On this bizarre physical journey, as with any learning journey, one steps through the same stages - and only when one has reached that point of being proficient at handling the unexpected, has one truly moved from *Expert*, perhaps, to *Able*.

### Reflections on our creativity

We knew we were setting out on an adventure - moving into contexts/cultures and challenges that were completely unknown to us. We started out focused on a destination, with a rough idea of some waypoints. We were driven by a common desire to achieve something difficult knowing we would have to overcome a set of technical challenges along the way. We shared the motivations of competing in a challenge and testing ourselves in the process, and interest and curiosity to explore new places. We prepared ourselves and our vehicle as best we could. We did our research, bought maps and guide books, prepared tools and equipment we thought we might need, and learned the necessary vocabulary. Essentially, we used our imagination to envision the journey and anticipate what we might encounter. We used our creativity to apply structure to the unstructured, and at the outset, this gave us the comfort, confidence and purpose to proceed with the journey.

The epiphany, however, came from looking back at the journey, with 20:20 hindsight. At times, what could go wrong did go wrong. They say necessity is the mother of invention and this was our experience. The greatest personal development and opportunity to use our creativity came through dealing with the unexpected. So much of that preparation proved

<sup>7</sup> Majdanek <http://www.usmmm.org/wlc/en/article.php?ModuleId=10005190>

<sup>8</sup> Chernobyl and Pripiat <http://www.kiddofspeed.com/chernobyl-revisited/>

<sup>9</sup> Aral Sea <https://www.rt.com/news/191952-aral-sea-dry-video/>

<sup>10</sup> Bykonur <http://www.russianspaceweb.com/baikonur.html>

<sup>11</sup> Kazakh salt lakes <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/resources/idt-a0c4856e-1019-4937-96fd-8714d70a48f7>

superfluous, apart from the initial confidence to make the journey and in the end we had to rely on ourselves and the resources we could find and make use of that were close to hand.

What saved the day was ditching the father-son, employer-employee, manager-gofer seniority paradigm, and subconsciously putting into practice the soft skills that team-role theory<sup>12</sup> is all about. That sort of hierarchy could well have stifled our creativity to problem-solve in the novel situations we encountered.

Solving the problems we encountered was a collaborative affair. We each learned, almost intuitively, which role to adopt, and when, and this has since served us both well in our home and professional lives. We learned how best to support, respect and encourage the timely application of one another's creativity.

And lastly, on the long rail journey home, I learned to love молоко (sweetened condensed milk) in my tea, and had a much better understanding of the origin of the jargon words used in *A Clockwork Orange*<sup>13</sup>. The truth is we never stop learning even if the stuff we learn seems incidental to the rest of our life it might come in handy one day and even if it doesn't it has in some small way enriched the meaning that is my life by triggering memories of things that are significant to me.



МОЛОКО

---

<sup>12</sup> Belbin team roles <http://www.belbin.com/about/belbin-team-roles/>

<sup>13</sup> Anthony Burgess, *A Clockwork Orange* [https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:A\\_Clockwork\\_Orange](https://en.wiktionary.org/wiki/Appendix:A_Clockwork_Orange)