

Always someone else to blame!

She has a tolerant expression as the man humphs that it was someone else's fault – *that it was **their** fault, not his*. He points generally to the ceiling of the bland interview room.

'What could you have done to prevent it?'

He repeats. 'It's not my fault. They are to blame.'

'Why don't you own the problem and sort it out?'

'I didn't cause the problem.' He folds his arms in defiant protection.

She takes her time to watch him, then says, 'Psychologists call that "external locus of control" – that you have no control, nor can you take responsibility for your own actions. Is that what you are telling me? That you can't make your own decisions?'

With a resisting scowl, 'But **they** made the mistake.'

'Well, didn't **you** actually make the mistake because you accepted information without checking to see if it was correct.'

He growls. 'It's their responsibility to make sure it's correct.'

'So, do **they** control what you do? Are you so accepting of everything you read or hear ... just because someone said it or wrote it?'

He gives a puzzled stare.

She smiles gently before continuing. 'The challenge today is that it's so much easier to be a critic, to complain, to express an opinion – whether or not it is correct – than it is to take personal responsibility for your own actions. No?'

A frown. 'What?'

'Own the problem,' she says. 'Use the difficulty to find a solution. That doesn't just mean blaming someone else for unwise decisions you've made.'

He points for emphasis 'But they are in positions of public responsibility. We must expect them to tell us the truth.'

'What is truth?'

'What? It means *what is **right*** ... not what is bloody wrong!'

'According to whom? How can you be sure you're hearing or reading the truth? How do you check it? Don't you need evidence?'

He clears his throat. 'You have to be able to trust important people to tell the truth ... sometimes ... most times. There are standards in society. Aren't there?'

She smiles. 'Some Fijians can walk over hot coals. I've seen them do it in performances for tourists. ... but you and I both know that hot coals will burn most bare feet. There has to be a trick or an illusion. Would you trust and just copy them or would you test to find how they did it?'

'Pah! I know who to trust.'

'But you still need to start with evidence, don't you? Even if it is from your own experience of hot surfaces. Or would you just blindly try it without checking?'

'I trust people who, I know, have told the truth in the past.'

'But, history is full of people using the power of their positions or eloquent arguments to give false information for their own reasons – even after having told the truth in the past. Wouldn't you need to check against other sources? Surely, you have to check? **Critical thinking!**'

He flicks his hand and sneers. 'And I think you are just arguing for the system. You're just **one** of them.'

She laughs. 'Far from that. I'm trying to help you pick the battles you want to fight. I'm trying to protect your mental health ... to not let you make it worse by being pig-headed about fault or justice in situations you are unlikely to win.'

'I know I'm right! Your words won't change anything.'

'Okay. Stay with me. We have time. Couldn't opinion just be imaginative fantasies ... produced without any checkable supporting evidence? Isn't that possible?'

The man scratches his ear and shudders, as he pretends not to hear.

She continues. 'And some people might choose to **believe** that opinion? That's what belief **is** – a leap of faith into accepting something that can't be checked in reality. For generations, everything from religions to snake-oil conmen to cults to power-crazy politicians have used that "*leap of faith*" technique, that trust ... sometimes just to deceive and manipulate others.'

He swallows and stares at her.

She keeps speaking calmly. 'In many cases, it's not illegal. It's just an opinion, someone's thought bubble ... no crime. So, the responsibility of adults in society is to own the challenges of their time and think through the evidence logically. Check what you're hearing is true.'

He says nothing.

She says, 'But we've been socialised to accept opinion as fact. Have we not? To express opinions without concern about whether or not they are true – to pass them on as gossip or to try to influence others' opinions – all without checking to see if there is any merit in the opinion.'

He purses his lips but asks, 'So, what d'you mean by this **critical thinking**'?

'Questioning the opinion's evidence base, checking claims independently, challenging theories by using testable processes – re-reading or re-listening to the information in case you might have misread or misheard or misinterpreted ... and then sadly, in the emotion of the moment, you might just have leapt onto the outrage bandwagon.'

'What? What are you talking about? Give me an example.'

'Where to start? We're schooled to **believe**, to trust from an early age, to accept what parents and older people tell us. That happens in every society. Yet we now know that we've been told many fairy tales ... like Santa Claus, flying through the sky on a reindeer-towed sled from the North Pole, bringing presents on Christmas Day ... all across the world. How old were you when you realised that was all made up? But you wanted the presents, the fun ... so you went along with it. You accepted the story – you **owned** it. You controlled that decision.'

A slight nod.

'History is **not absolute fact**. It is made up of stories, written by people – how they saw evidence of the past and joined those dots into a tale of what most probably happened. Scientists over the centuries have tried to explain complex ideas, like magnetism or engineering, but always with the security that it has to be checkable by others – **the certainty of doubt**. And that is acceptable in building knowledge... how to improve understanding, by testing and checking theories. Mathematics uses logic to solve problems, how proving one thing can lead to proving another – they call that first-principle proof. It is checkable, testable ... and it works across cultures and languages.

'But we also have religions – a natural human reaction to try to explain the unexplainable, like the creation of the universe. But religions ask us to "believe" ... without any testable evidence.'

The man is watching, thinking.

She continues. 'And now we live in a world of talk-back radio and podcasts asking for opinions ... and social media where any opinion can be stated and

accepted, if the reader or listener chooses ... and yet, the opinion could be totally false, harmful, nasty, damaging. An interesting case occurred recently in the USA where a talk-back host falsely claimed that a checkable tragedy involving children being killed was a hoax. He persisted with his clearly false claim. He had lots of followers and was making buckets of money from their support.

'His defence in court was that he **believed** what he said was true. To which the Judge responded, after testing all the evidence in the trial, "Just because you choose to believe something is true when it clearly isn't, doesn't make it true." She found him guilty of high-level defamation and made an order of multiple millions of dollars to be paid by him to the defamed parties for the damage caused.'

The man coughs quietly.

'In school English classes, you will have come across the works of William Shakespeare who lived in the late 16th century and wrote some of the best plays and poetry in the English language – 38 full-length plays in total, across tragedy, comedy and history, in many lands ... along with 159 top-class poems. The work is undoubtedly of very high quality ... and was allegedly written by a grain dealer and sometime-actor from a village on the River Avon in England ... doubtless with a feather quill dipped in an inkwell – no fast word-processing back then – and to achieve all that in a relatively short lifetime.

'And yet there is no evidence of his handwriting (beyond a couple of signatures on legal documents) – not a letter, not a list, not a note, not a mention of bequeathing his prolific writing in his will ... nor is there any mention by his peers **in his lifetime** of this man from Avon writing all this work – although the plays were being performed at that time in London.

'Rather, the first connection between the grain dealer and this fine trove of English literature came well over a hundred years after his death when a promoter publicised a several-day festival of William Shakespeare works ... proclaiming this Stratford-on-Avon man as the sole writer of all these plays and poems – without any checkable confirming evidence beyond the coincidence of his name. The narrative then took on a life of its own (*went viral* in the parlance of today) with a plethora of implied justifications emerging later to explain how this man who had never travelled beyond England or worked in a royal court had

acquired such a vast knowledge of Italy, Denmark and Scotland along with the detailed lives of kings, queens, court procedures and international battles.

'More likely, the works were written by several people who actually did have those experiences but, for their own reasons, wanted to remain hidden behind the anonymity of pen names. The later promotion narrative has conflated all their work into this mysterious, much-lauded one person ... and it has gone so viral over the years that to have any inquisitive challenge to such an entrenched acceptance, taught in schools for centuries, is akin to heresy.'

The man is attentive, thinking.

'More. Martin Luther, a 16th century German priest, professor and theological scholar, challenged the Roman Catholic Church over some of its teaching and practices, such as indulgences – making money from people's beliefs that they should pay now, for possible favours in a life after death. Having tried to argue his case through all the proper church channels he eventually pinned his written 95 grievances to a church door in Wittenberg. For which he was thrown out of the Catholic Church by Pope Leo X and sentenced to death by the Holy Roman Emperor, Charles V.

'He survived ... thanks to the careful intervention of his supporters and so began the widespread Protestant Reformation which Luther's significant influence started. He helped change the way that Western religion could be viewed. That change continues in many countries today, in opposition to the teachings of the Church of Rome.'

The man raises his hand. 'That's my point. The Catholic Church was in the wrong. They should have been trusted to teach the truth and they tried to have him shut up ... and killed. They were at fault. That's my point.'

She smiles. 'But ... both church systems still exist today. Luther used his difficulty to help his followers to find a different way ... an ultimately successful way. The powerful "others" didn't accept blame (or change) but Luther found lasting ways round the problem. He retained his **locus of control**. There is always a challenge when individuals deal with powerful institutions.'

He gives a thoughtful nod.

'One more,' she suggests. 'You would be aware of the 1963 assassination of US President John F Kennedy (JFK). That was effectively a *coup d'état* to overthrow the leadership of the elected president and replace him with a more

amenable successor. The evidence that is available today strongly suggests that JFK was killed in a cross-fire of gunshots from several directions by persons that have never been brought to trial. The new president, Lyndon Johnson, formed the Warren Commission to investigate the crime and to provide a satisfactory explanation to a public who, he expected, would naturally believe the word of such a group of high-ranking luminaries from US society.

'The Commission's conclusion was that one shooter, Lee Oswald, was the only shooter, who committed the crime for reasons unknown ... and he was dead. However, after studying the Commission findings, it became obvious to any critical thinker that the evidence didn't support that conclusion at all. Witnesses had been intimidated, ignored or met suspicious deaths. Proper processes for autopsy and custody of evidence were not followed. Evidence had been tampered with, and replaced. The extent of the cover-up must have involved the most senior government agencies (justified as *for the good of the country*) ... and your point exactly ... **they were people who should have been trustworthy**. Indeed, the findings were so unbelievable that Oswald was probably not even present at the times and locations where he was alleged to have committed murders.

'But, the powerful had achieved their objective of *coup d'état* and the guilty were never brought to courtroom justice. On the other hand, from that time on, the American public lost their automatic believing trust in their public institutions and the words of elected leaders. No more blind acceptance – or so they thought.'

The man is wide-eyed.

She continues with her gentle smile. 'So the challenge for you is to appreciate that all that is said or written is not necessarily true. It could be misinformation or disinformation or attempts to influence for motives that may be scarcely understandable ... but, unless it is testable or checkable, it should be treated with the certainty of doubt. **That responsibility is yours!**

'Where is your locus of control? Are you in charge of you? Or will you be blindly outraged when you realise that you have been duped by some false information. Rather ... just question everything ... **including what I've just told you**. Find a solution that doesn't hurt **you** even more. It's easy to complain and be angry but pick the battles carefully that you will choose to fight. **There are always more ways to resolve situations successfully than being defiantly correct and self-righteous!**