

# **Assertive** HUMILITY

**Emerging  
from the ego trap**

S T U A R T T A Y L O R



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# Foreword by Dr Charlie Teo

At the time I received the final draft of Stuart's book, I had recently undertaken a global initiative with the Cure For Life Foundation in which we brought together brilliant minds from across the globe to look at how we might use different perspectives to solve the complex problem of brain cancer. During this workshop I experienced a life changing revelation – that some of the biggest blocks to finding a cure were in fact the attitudes and egos of people working within a system. Unfortunately, these individuals become negative forces that restrict other people and systems from flourishing.

Emerging from this workshop, attended by many of the world's most esteemed scientists, was a simple solution. We have to move from an 'ego' based system to an 'eco' based system, and to do that the system of science needs to shift from a hero model to a host model ... one that nurtures and supports researchers rather than one that encourages a silo mentality and fierce competition. In turn, the common good will prevail, and fast.

Being a black belt in karate, I grew up with the notions of stillness, mindfulness and clarity of thought and it is the discipline around these that has carried me forward during my career as a neurosurgeon. I learnt the art of listening, a sense of humility, a great appreciation for humanity and a love of people, devoid of any judgement which serves to separate one from others. I was bullied at school and am acutely aware of being marginalised, yet this experience shaped me in positive ways. It made me grateful and

proud to be an Australian and drove me to demonstrate compassion towards my companions. I am known as a man who doesn't withhold truth, and as I ponder the concept of honesty, I am acutely aware of the impact truth may have on people. I have found that the most resilient and egoless are often those who embrace truth easiest.

We all have a desire to love and be loved, yet the hallmark of love is 'being'. This book guides the reader through this journey of allowing and being, craftily written so that it not only makes change seem possible but inspires the reader to pursue it. Stuart gives great strength to the reader and a forthright pathway for the evolution of individuals, communities, corporates and humanity as a whole, through the wisdom that he so graciously shares with us.

It is my hope that brain cancer no longer diminishes lives, for if it does the Stuart Taylors of this world, who have so much to contribute, will miss out on making their important contributions to humanity. Ultimately this would be humanity's great loss. I encourage those reading this book to support the work of the Cure For Life Foundation so that we can curb the rise in brain cancer and find answers to treat, manage and prevent the disease, sparing future generations of its burden.

*Dr Charlie Teo, AM, is a neurosurgeon and a board member of the Cure For Life Foundation*

# Foreword by Rebecca McGrath

As a business person who regularly has a significant backlog of non-fiction books to read, I will often rely on personal connections and recommendations to prioritise my reading. In this context, I read Stuart Taylor's book with interest, enthusiasm and perhaps the same initial question many other readers will have: is the concept 'assertive humility' not a contradiction in terms? Upon completing this reflective, first person account by Stuart, my conclusion was quite to the contrary. In the development of his hypothesis, he proposes assertive humility as a higher level of consciousness that embraces purpose and presence as well as compassion and caring. Put more simply, as he describes it, it is "a more authentic way to be".

When I first met Stuart Taylor several years ago, I was living the busy and driven executive life that he too had experienced earlier in his career. My interactions with him through the Resilience Institute made me reflect (as do many who have attended his programs) on the way my work controlled and to a large extent defined my life. I was struck by Stuart's insightful and thoughtful delineation of the role that physical, psychological and spiritual resilience plays in our lives.

Through memorable interactions with great leaders of both people and thought during my career, I have become a true believer in the value of authentic leadership. Unfortunately, when we look around the Australian business community today, we see too many leaders who are confined and controlled by their egos or their focus on positional power and authority.

In *Assertive Humility*, Stuart Taylor unravels what is behind this lack of authenticity in so many of us. This is done engagingly through his use of personal reflection as well as anecdotes and references to some of the world's great psychologists. He explores the importance of the awareness of spirit, through a focus on values and purpose; the power of positivity and optimism; the impacts of under-caring and detachment; and the effects of approval seeking and dependency.

Stuart's personal journey, including his near-death experience with brain cancer, provides the reader with a deeply emotional and at times witty account of how he enhanced his own level of consciousness on his journey towards assertive humility. His practical examples and daily practices differentiate this book from many of the 'self help' books available today. Indeed, Stuart's understanding of big business culture and the factors that drive and motivate individuals to succeed affirms the great value of the concepts and mental models which he proposes in *Assertive Humility*. This will have particular value to those who are interested in improving their own leadership and impact through an enhanced level of self-awareness.

Stuart's journey has led him to explore the much debated issue of work-life balance. Whilst he concludes there is no magic formula, he is a great advocate for the investment in and the maintenance of one's own energy, and asserts this to be a much more effective approach than achieving some arbitrary separation in time (i.e. between work and family time). Energy in Stuart's context goes well beyond mere physical fitness, including time for self-reflection,

and any other activities that ‘rejuvenate the soul’. For any business person who is struggling with fitting everything into their day, Stuart Taylor has some helpful and experienced advice.

*Assertive Humility* is, above all, an intensely personal account of transformation. Stuart shares with us his story from childhood, his life-changing experiences and his deeply considered reflections and advice for “a more authentic way to be”. A search for purpose, presence, mindfulness and equanimity will take you a long way on Stuart Taylor’s journey.

*Rebecca McGrath is a non-executive director of CSR Limited, Goodman Group, Incitec Pivot Limited and OzMinerals Limited. She is a member of the Advisory Council - Australia - J.P.Morgan.*

# **PROLOGUE**

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Waking up

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You're living the dream.

You've got a great job. The hours are long – fourteen or more a day – but that doesn't matter because you're operating at the sharp end. Enormous intellectual challenge, working with powerful people, intimately involved in the big decisions. Work is fulfilling – totally fulfilling. It's stressful but it's also a constant buzz; adrenaline hit after adrenaline hit. You're spending money and you're earning money.

You're working amongst the elite – recognised as elite – and enjoying the benefits as a result. You're well looked after: travelling well, staying well, eating well. There's no denying that the platinum cards, five-star hotels and hatted restaurants are enjoyable, but in the end they are a reasonable reward for the effort you're putting in and the sacrifices you're making: the big decisions with your name on them, the associated stress, and the time away from home. Being looked after is just one small way of keeping you fresh and focused.

Speaking of home, you have to be thankful for your understanding spouse and forgiving kids. You know you don't see them enough, but the money compensates: they're well looked after. Nice home, the best schools, great holidays. And anyway, at this rate you'll be financially independent in just a few years and then you'll be able to spend much more time with them.

Your life is like riding a bike down a mountain road at top speed. You're pedalling as fast as you can, braking only enough before

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each corner to negotiate it safely. Then you pedal like mad again to rebuild your speed. To slow down too much would be a sign of weakness – it might allow someone else to catch up. To think about what you're doing, or why you're doing it, for more than the briefest moment would be to risk bringing your ride to a premature and probably messy end. You've worked hard and earned the right to be here. It wasn't dumb luck. And anyway, it is a lot of fun. Why would you want to stop?

In December 2001 this is the dream I was living, and had been living for a decade. I was enjoying the ride. A month later I was lying in a hospital bed, my head shaved and a surgeon's map drawn neatly onto my scalp with a permanent marker. Over the next twenty-four hours there was a chance I would lose my ability to speak, receive permanent damage to my brain, or even die. And if I was fortunate enough that none of those happened – that the brain tumour was successfully removed – I still faced the likely prospect of death within two or three years.

The trouble with travelling at high speed is that you can't do it if you think about it. Thinking causes hesitation, which causes uncertainty, and that's a recipe for failure. Back at my desk only five months after surgery, I found myself hesitating. It quickly became clear that I was not going to be able to get back on the bike. I had been changed by cancer.

I decided to take a year off at this point to work myself out, and came away with a completely different perspective on my work. In time, I would find myself grateful for this change in outlook

(though not as grateful as one corporate friend might have been – he commented to me that I was ‘lucky to have the opportunity to take time off to explore’, seemingly forgetting the circumstances). Certainly my new level of consciousness – to use a term from the work I do now – has helped me build a more fulfilling life. Up to the point of my illness, I was ego centred – the world revolved around me – which at times led to arrogance and at other times to low self-confidence. Now, as will be explained fully, I am closer to what I call ‘assertive humility’. That means having more care and compassion for both others and myself while my behaviour, decisions and expressed opinions are consistent with my values and beliefs. Assertive humility is an approach to life that is characterised by equanimity, not superiority or inferiority, and by presence with, not distance from, others. It comes with a sense of purpose and a sense of modesty. It is, simply, a more authentic way to be.

All of which conjures another interesting thought: What if I hadn’t got sick? Would anything have changed or would I still be pedalling at the same crazy pace? Barring a life-threatening illness, what does it take to force a crazy-busy, work-absorbed person to question the wisdom of what they are doing?

These questions lie at the heart of this book. It is not a book that tries to make judgements about the high-end corporate lifestyle or anyone who is living it. As I’ve said, and will expand upon later, I’ve been there myself, enjoyed virtually every minute of it and completely understand its allure. Nor is this book a cancer survival story. I’ll talk about my cancer and the fight against it, but largely in the context of what I learnt from the experience and

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the consciousness that was opened up as a result. For me, a very serious illness became a very serious wake-up call. My hope is that for you this book raises some of the same questions I faced – without the trauma.

There is one point I need to make before sharing my story. As we go, I'm also going to share, and explain, a model of consciousness that attempts to explain my shift from ego-centredness towards assertive humility. I believe this model has broad applicability and could also help you become a more conscious individual – someone who operates with less ego and more assertive humility. While it took a major disruption to my life for me to start to understand my consciousness, hopefully you will be able to do so without such a disruption.

When I started looking back over my life in preparation for this book, it seemed naturally to fall into a number of stages, defined roughly by four hats I wore along the way: from my Cub Scout hat to my Air Force officer hat to my corporate executive hat to my bandana. While these act to provide visual cues, it is not intended that the hats be seen as tying in with specific phases in the consciousness model I am presenting.