

## UNDERDOG

From the age of five years I was bullied by a boy called Ray Mullins who lived in my Sydney suburban street. It was widely believed in the street that Greg's policeman father gave him boxing lessons. Greg's advantages were that he was big for his age, he had a long reach and he was very aggressive. With blunt use of these attributes he ran a little street gang of neighbourhood boys, who were useful for holding his victims while he punched them. His early character is revealed by the story that even in infant school (which some of us started at age four) he would hide behind the corners of buildings and jump on passing children.

As soon as I could I became a voracious reader, probably around age six. It was not unusual for me to read an Enid Blyton book in a day, but my bad reading habits soon made me the only boy in the street with glasses. My nerdish appearance and my good school marks marked me out from the other boys, who were not readers or academically inclined. I believe this is why I was picked on by Ray and his little gang of thugs, both in the street where we used to play and in the school playground we shared. I don't mean to say I was a little angel: I had the usual conflicts with my baby sister and I was also very good at throwing stones, a couple of times injuring other children.

But Ray and his gang defeated me.

I found a creative way to get back at him. In the course of my reading I discovered that if you used orange juice instead of ink, you could write a letter in invisible writing. The letter could only be read if you heated the paper with a candle flame. I was pretty sure Ray wouldn't know this so a couple of times I sneaked letters into his letterbox, telling him he was a horrid boy, Enid Blyton style. These would have appeared to be blank sheets of paper!

My regular beatings by Ray meant that my parents had to replace broken pairs of glasses, something they could ill-afford. My mother got fed up with this so she arranged for me to take lessons at a gym that trained Aboriginal boxers. She had always encouraged me to fight back but clearly it wasn't working.

The two people I most remember from the gym were both Aboriginal. One was a gentle giant who taught me the basic straight left, and the other a boy about my own age they were training to be a champion. On one occasion they put me in the ring with the boy, probably for a joke. After knocking me down effortlessly with one punch, he very generously let me hit him in his fantastic abs.

I was nine years old, it was school holidays and I had been attending the gym for about six months. A small boy called Hutton from our street raced into our backyard. Close on his heels was our mate Ray, calling on him to stop and fight. I was feeling pretty cocky from my boxing training so I offered to fight Ray instead. When Ray accepted my mother quickly produced two pairs of boxing gloves, and we paraded out onto the street to have a proper match. It was agreed this would take place on the opposite side of the road where there was a wide grass verge in front of the houses. A loose ring was formed from children and mothers; all the men were at work. Did I say I was cocky?

Someone signalled the first round so I put up my gloves in the way I had been taught and advanced steadily towards Ray, jabbing with my excellent straight left. He rushed towards

me waving his arms like windmills and knocked me over with a haymaker on the chin. That was the end of the first round. The second round started and I was still confident I could win the day. But Ray did his windmill thing again, I got a bloody nose and I was knocked out for a few seconds. The mothers stopped the fight.

In our suburban street the mothers competed fiercely with each other over the successes of their children, especially, I believe, their sons. Because it was unexpected my defeat was particularly humiliating for me, but possibly worse was that I had failed my mother in a very public way. So I kept on trying. I remember another occasion when I challenged Mullins during the lunch break in the Hornsby primary school. We did a complete circle of the bitchmen playground with him backing off taunting me and me following him with my fists up. Then he stopped and knocked me down in a little dirt patch.

Just as I was turning twelve, he and his mate Johnny Palmer caught up with me after a scout meeting. I had overheard them talking about 'getting me' and I had tried to race them home on my scooter. I was wearing a new jumper that my mother had knitted, depicting a cowboy on a leaping horse. I was concerned not to damage the jumper, but I knew by this time that boxing was useless. So we wrestled each other to the roadway, and I managed to pin Mullins down with a neck lock. Neither of us won, but after that he stopped bothering me. I thought that was the end of the matter.

Landmark education works with the things we don't know that we don't know. In my landmark advanced course I was asked to write the story of my life in fifteen minutes. The title of the story came easily, '*Underdog*'. The first half of the story came easily too, it was the story of my childhood bullying. The point of the exercise was to give up the story, to see that it was a piece of fiction. But I was not ready to give it up so easily, I thought it was a terrific story. When a landmark trainer asked me what kind of 'payoff' could make me so attached to my story, I burst out laughing and said "Because I'm right!" I was right and those little boys I grew up with were wrong, every one of them.

The next step in the landmark advanced course was to declare publicly I was giving up the story, with all the sincerity and conviction I could muster. I did this exercise. Then at a break for lunch a girl asked how I was going and I burst out laughing because I suddenly got it.

The key was uncovering what I had decided when I was defeated in the street fight. This was not a decision I had articulated as a child, either aloud or to myself. It was more like a gut response, but very specific nonetheless. It was a powerful command, driven partly by all the years of bullying that preceded the fight. It was "I can't do it!" These four words were actually addressed to my mother: "I can't do what you want and defeat the bully!" The four words also encapsulated a number of related decisions: "I will not lead or volunteer; I will hang back and speak quietly to avoid being noticed; I will not trust boys."

There was also an "I'll show them" element which had manifested in my childhood as the fight to a draw with Mullins.

The way these decisions framed my adult life is very obvious. I did not trust men and I was slow to form male friendships, preferring female friends instead. I always sided with the underdog, whether it was the losing side in a sports match, or overseas university students swamped by the whitebread student majority. When the women's liberation movement came

along I identified with them as an underdog group. I was one of the first cool male women liberationists.

Being an underdog, being right, being a hide-out, these were three of the key foundation stones on which I constructed my adult personality.

Another key foundation stone, also unconscious, was a decision never to have children. The origins of this lay in the feeling that my childhood was populated by hostile little boys.

When I was a university lecturer I loved the material but I spoke to the blackboard. When I joined the public service I assiduously avoided management positions, except when there was no other way to progress my career. If I had subordinate staff I managed them in the same way I expected to be managed, ie to be left alone, which often didn't work very well. I became a union delegate and joined the left wing of the ALP in the mistaken belief that unions and the left represented underdogs (they do, but more importantly they represent collective power). Although I was comfortable having a conversation with one or two people I clammed up in larger groups, even if I had something useful to contribute. If I was asked to ad lib a comment in a meeting I would probably be either speechless or tongue tied. I would go to extraordinary lengths to avoid public speaking.

Landmark education showed me I had created my life from a set of decisions made by a humiliated nine year old boy. This is what is meant by the landmark claim that it teaches the things we do not know that we do not know. I simply had no idea that I had decided as a child the direction my life was going to take. Nor that I had decided which areas of life were to be off-limits.

This didn't mean I was unsuccessful, either in relationships or work. I was privileged to have several close male and female friends, and a very special long term partner, now deceased. When I worked as a geology lecturer my colleagues and I constructed a Bachelor of Science program which was accredited by the relevant Australian authorities. My geology students valued my lectures. During my employment in the commonwealth public service I worked very hard to bag a job where I had no staff to supervise but was paid the same salary as the manager of seventy staff. It was a great job that gave full expression to my writing, analytical and decision-making skills. It also gave me sufficient time to engage intensely as a union delegate, so that by the time I left the CPS I was the most senior union delegate in the whole department, as the secretary of the national delegates committee. In this capacity I helped negotiate enterprise bargaining agreements with national senior management.

In my landmark program I resolved to give up my "I can't do it!" story in favour of a new way of being. Instead of being a "can't do it" person I decided I would be an expression of delight.

Dropping my story did free me up. Amongst other things I started to have some success with public speaking, I became more comfortable talking to men I didn't know, and I could contribute to group discussions and formal meetings without losing my voice. Most importantly, I came to value my point of view and my life experiences, something I always previously denied.

If a little boy can set the direction of a whole life, what can an unconstrained adult do? I resolved to give everything I've got to however many years I have left. There are so many possibilities. I need only pick and choose between the ones that call me.

Kundan (my yoga name)

September 2010

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### **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS Feb-Dec2020**

For years after 2009-2010 I felt I had given up the story and was no longer repeating it. Looking back I believe this was only really true with respect to the main theme, "the Underdog". In early 2020 I belatedly realised that for a long time "I can't do it!" was still a very strong starting point whenever I felt confronted with—or had chosen to undertake—a difficult problem or project outside of my usual day to day activities of producing a commentary on international affairs. But also that the story was more complicated than the understanding I had got to in 2010.

As landmark education teaches, it's of utmost importance to distinguish stories and events. The original sequence of events started with the public street fight that saw me defeated, a period of physical struggle and mental anxiety for as much as three years where I sought for ways to deal with Mullins. Finally, about age 11-12, I fought him to a draw by choosing to wrestle rather than box, as I knew I couldn't win with the latter. Despite it being almost private, with Johnny Palmer as the only witness, Mullins left me alone after that. (Or perhaps he simply lost the opportunity, as I started at North Sydney Boys Technical High School in 1956, and he must have done another year in primary school that year, before attending Hornsby Junior Boys Technical School in 1957, and Normo in 1958-59.)

Out of these events I made a three-part story, "I can't do it!" at the beginning, a period of struggle in the middle, and a victory of sorts at the end.

In the course of writing a lengthy new submission in February 2020, I started to question why I had to go through this period of struggle in order to do the submission. But even this was still a misunderstanding.

As already described, the original story contained a double act, starting with "I can't do it!" and then "I'll show you!" In landmark education there is always a mirror image of an important decision made by a child, and "I'll show you" or something similar is a common one.

The story meant I had to experience the mental anguish and anxiety of "I can't do it!" first—by recreating it if necessary—before "I'll show you".

The full story was a formula for success (or in fight terms, winning). It compelled me to go through all three stages of the process each time I took on a project. If external stressors were lacking, I needed to make them up, otherwise I couldn't manage.

The middle period of struggle involves a form of procrastination. Procrastination is a well known trope within general society. Although this was my own peculiar version it involved many of the features in society's version, such as: avoiding beginning the task by completing other outstanding tasks that are not as urgent but have less anxiety loading; choosing distractions such as socialising, movies, cleaning and gardening; and sleepless nights. Last but not least, requesting extensions past the deadline, and then a last minute dash, usually resulting in a report that was less than what it could have been.

With this realisation came the lifting of the compulsion to go through stages one and two, and on this occasion I just went ahead and did my project, submitting well before the due date.

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### **ADDITIONAL COMMENTS 2022**

There is the list of things I failed to do because of this racket/story. The one that comes to mind most easily is my failure to have some family member biographies published in the 1991 Australian Biographical and Genealogical Record (ABGR) because I couldn't meet the deadlines for submissions. I could not convince myself I had the skill to write prose outside my then job in the Department of Veterans' Affairs.

The big daddy of all distractions for me was burying myself in a good book. I remember my mother complaining when I was a child how difficult it was to drag me out of a book. In my third year at university I stopped studying a month before the end of year exams to spend a week reading Ayn Rand's 1100 page Atlas Shrugged (I was politically naive then).

*Metaphor contributed by Bomber 3April22: Every time I face a new challenge I put on the boxing gloves and get ready to wrestle!*