

re-think |  
**how to think  
differently**

**Nigel May Barlow**



CAPSTONE



**re-think**



*We have worked with Nigel and his technique for many years, and re-thinking has proven to be a source of 'new thinking', not just once, but continuously. It has been inspirational as well as practical, which has enabled us to continue to go from strength to strength and stay a leader in our field.*

*Karin Forseke, CEO  
Carnegie Investment Bank AB*

*Our senior Occupational Health team have been working with these ideas and the result has been the development for the first time of a clear definition of what world-class excellence means in our profession, and how this can be translated from grandiose words into measurable actions and benefits. We could not have achieved this without the extra creativity from Nigel as a catalyst.*

*Dr John Cooper, Head of Corporate Occupational Health  
Unilever*

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## RE-THINK

noun, verb

- 1 To discover different, better, or new ways of approaching familiar problems and situations.
- 2 To develop ways of achieving this.
- 3 To have the courage to put new ideas into practice.
- 4 An insight that's a fresh take.

## YES, BUT

noun, verb

- 1 To evaluate and judge an idea even before you've fully heard it.
- 2 An attitude that's adverse to fresh thinking.
- 3 Having the mindset of a critic rather than a creator.

*Barlow's Creative Dictionary*, Oxford, 2006





# contents



Thank you	ix
Dedication	x
Introduction	1
<b>1 The way we see things</b>	<b>11</b>
Borrowing the perceptions of others	23
New fantasies, new heroes	28
Spring-clean your beliefs	33
<b>2 Awakening curiosity</b>	<b>39</b>
Open-page thinking	53
New people, new ideas	57
Things to be curious about	62
<b>3 Intuition and eureka</b>	<b>71</b>
Accelerating eureka	84
Mind the gap	88
Idleness and the environment for intuition	92
<b>4 Paying attention</b>	<b>99</b>
Taking a bat's view	116
Family rituals	120
There's no present like the time	125

5	<b>Co-creation</b>	131
	Blue thinking	144
	A question of style	148
6	<b>Funny bones</b>	151
	Ah-aha-haha!	161
7	<b>Simply beautiful</b>	171
	Surround yourself with beauty	183
8	<b>Storytime!</b>	187
	Writing and living your story	200
9	<b>Meditation</b>	211
	Just do it!	224
10	<b>You, me, us – relationships</b>	225
	Relate!	243
11	<b>The biggest re-think of all</b>	247
	<b>Coda – Acting as if</b>	255
	<b>Appendix 1 – The <i>Re-Think</i> research</b>	257
	<b>Appendix 2 – <i>Re-think</i> resources</b>	271
	About Nigel Barlow	275
	Index	277

# Thank you

A big thank you to all of the individuals and companies I have worked with on re-thinking over the years. Particularly for putting some very challenging projects my way.

Especially I would like to thank: Charles Cunningham for his scientific clarity; Angie Kaye for her support and re-thinks; my friends and colleagues Ian Taylor and Robert Maguire; Michael Rant for re-think examples; Paul Gerhardt for friendship and ideas; Dr Stephen Steinhilber for designing the survey that influenced this book; my insightful agent Caroline Davidson, and John Moseley at Capstone who has been a highly perceptive and supportive champion of this book. And to those of you around the world who filled in the survey! Also Richard Thompson and all my re-think heroes for creative inspiration.

If I've left anyone off this list, it's down to pure malice rather than a faulty memory.

Most of all to Janet Hanson, who helped to create the book and without whom it simply wouldn't have been possible.

*Re-Think* is dedicated to

My mother Jean

My family – Angie, Jamie, and Rosie

and

The memory of

my cousin Janice

# Introduction

*Re-Think* will open your mind to fresh possibilities in your everyday life and help you to recapture a childlike sense of curiosity. To re-think means to see different and better solutions to any problem, whether you want to reorganize your life, become closer to your partner, or create a new business idea. All that's needed is for you to put the power of your attention on creative re-thinking and you can't help but have better ideas.

We should all be re-thinkers. Here's why.

A re-thinker has:

- openness to different and better solutions;
- techniques to see the familiar in a fresh light;
- a default setting that thinks 'why not?' 'what if?' rather than 'yes, but';
- ways of accessing deeper levels of thought;

- knowledge of how to create more eureka moments; and
- the courage and will to put new ideas into practice.

A re-thinker is a dreamer who does!

Of course, thinking differently doesn't always produce a better or more useful solution. I live in Oxford, a city of thinkers. During the Second World War a philosopher don from one of the colleges convinced the government that he couldn't be called up for military service because he was, in fact, a duck. He used the full weight of his formidable intelligence to construct an invincible argument on this point. Presumably the intellectual resources of the nation were deployed on more vital issues than out-philosophizing this man.

This is an instance of being able to think differently without thinking better, especially as his cleverness rebounded on him. When he applied for a driving licence after the war, even a bureaucrat could point out the simple truth that ducks don't drive. To re-think means not just to think differently for the sake of it – stimulating though that can be – but to also come up with better solutions.

I've spent much of the last 25 years helping people – individuals, teams and organizations – to see their situation in fresh and creative ways: their lives, careers, personal development, relationships, and businesses. This has taken me to six continents, working with groups as varied as Korean engineers, BBC programme makers, Swedish bankers, and American beer retailers.

I have to tell you it's not all been a picnic: there are some very fixed mindsets out there. And that's just the experts on creativity. Many of them have been using the same examples for the last 25 years. Which is why I prefer the word re-think to creativity.

Re-thinking does encompass the idea of creativity, and at times I will interchange the concepts. But unfortunately words have limiting associations. Creativity is too often stereotyped as something that happens in the arts, in research science, the minds of inventors, in the media, or perhaps in advertising where people are even given the label ‘creatives’.

I want to engage you in thinking of creativity in a way that seeps into and infuses every area of your life, not just an approach you roll out for a formal brainstorming session. Inventor Buckminster Fuller decided he wanted to make his life like a trim tab for the planet. A trim tab is a small part of a boat’s rudder, which despite its insignificant size has the power to gradually turn the direction of the whole vessel. *Re-think* is like a trim tab that can help you guide your life in different and better directions.

## THINKING AS UNUSUAL: EIGHT GREAT RE-THINKS

To get us started here’s a list of re-thinks to show what breakthroughs can result from thinking differently and challenging received wisdom in a variety of fields. Thinking as *unusual*. It’s *not* intended as a Top 8: I’ll leave that to the TV programme makers who seem increasingly unable to think in any way but lists! (Presenting *connections* between different musicians, artists, and performers would be a far more interesting approach.)

You can take any of the principles of re-thinking from these examples and start applying them to a problem right now. They are all ways of thinking afresh, of coming up with new or just better solutions. Re-thinks.

### 1 Reversing the obvious 1: The Fosbury Flop

Dick Fosbury is an American athlete who revolutionized the high jump by leaping backwards over the bar. In the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City he won the Gold medal and set a new Olympic record. Now almost all modern high jumpers use Fosbury's backwards 'flop'.

*Re-think: Turn the problem you're facing on its head; approach it backwards.*

### 2 Taking a big risk: The South African Truth And Reconciliation Commission (TRC)

After the end of apartheid the TRC enabled anyone who had been a victim of violence to come forward and give testimony, much of which was televised nationally and internationally. No one was exempt – this included members of the African National Congress as well as the South African police. Perpetrators of crimes could also give testimony and request amnesty. Though not perfect, it's generally regarded as a great success and a refreshing re-think on 'an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'.

*Re-think: Who do you need to get together with to clear the past?*

### 3 Pushing beyond the limits: Like A Rolling Stone by Bob Dylan

This 1965 release – rated in *Rolling Stone* magazine as the greatest popular song of all time – was not only semi-improvised, but also challenged the artistic and business conventions of its time by running to six minutes in length. The prevailing mindset was that you couldn't have a song more than three minutes long because people just wouldn't listen to it all the way through. Columbia came up with their own solution to the problem by putting half of the song on each side of the record.



*Re-think: What are the self-limiting boundaries you need to break to come up with new solutions?*

#### **4 Thinking both/and: Most products from Apple**

Combining technology with design, beauty with functionality, is one of the great contributions of Apple. Founder Steven Jobs is passionate about putting together musicians, artists, and even historians with the nerds. The difference shows in a world of grey boxes. The iPod is the first piece of technology that I think is beautiful.

*Re-think: How can you combine seemingly unrelated fields and people to produce more beautiful solutions?*

#### **5 Reversing the obvious 2: Copernicus' discovery of heliocentricity**

Nicolaus Copernicus developed the sun-centred theory of the solar system at the beginning of the sixteenth century in a way that was detailed enough to make it scientifically valuable. Interestingly, astronomy was just a hobby of his, and yet his findings that the earth was not in fact at the centre of the solar system opened the floodgates for the modern scientific revolution, and was a profound challenge to religious views of a geocentric universe.

*Re-think: Consider what are the most fundamental assumptions you're making about a situation and challenge them one by one.*

#### **6 Re-writing the rulebook: Wikipedia online encyclopedia**

Wikipedia is an encyclopedia written by its users, which anyone can add an entry to – and it's free. Founder Jimmy Wales has a mission to make much of human knowledge free and in the public domain. If you're worried about accuracy, a scientist deliberately introduced 13 errors to the encyclopedia, most of which were corrected by subscribers within hours. The world's first encyclopedia was launched in 1743; the impact of Wikipedia may be just as great.

*Re-think: How can you use enthusiasts to rewrite the rulebook in your own field?*

## 7 Beautifying the bland: Artwork on garage doors

A service yard door in a Basingstoke, UK, shopping centre has been made a work of art by silversmith Chris Knight, and nominated for a prestigious prize. Knight has become an evangelist for bringing more style to everyday and overlooked industrial objects. The way the light shines through the garage doors is reminiscent of Moorish art. He has also brought beauty to metalwork in a Gateshead multi-storey car park in the northeast of England.

*Re-think: Don't assume anything has to be what its stereotype suggests.*

## 8 Selling a story: The Body Shop

The success and the reputation of Body Shop are not based on the products (e.g. Peppermint Foot Lotion) that it sells. Instead, customers feel they are buying into the values of charismatic founder Anita Roddick. Her campaigning against animal testing and ecological plundering is a big part of why many customers buy her products. Increasingly, the story behind what you do is becoming as important as the product or service itself.

*Re-think: What's your story?*

These examples should give you the idea that there is nothing too big or too small to re-think, and no limit to the strategies you use. You can apply a re-think to anything.

Of course, the assumption behind re-thinking is that we *have* thought in the first place. Once I was coaching a 16-year-old girl in study skills. She put down her book, fixed me with a keen gaze and said, 'It's hard to *revise* something, when you haven't *vised* it in the first place.'

The poet Robert Frost observed that ‘the human brain is a wonderful thing. It starts functioning as soon as we wake in the morning – and stops the minute we enter the office.’ Unfortunately there is much truth in this. It’s possible to stay on automatic pilot and sleepwalk through life without really paying attention to the infinite possibilities that exist all around us.

*Re-Think* aims to make you more aware of your own thinking process, helping you to switch into another creative gear when you need it.

## **RE-THINK RESEARCH**

Many of the examples in the book come from my experience of helping individuals and companies to creatively re-think. There’s also much from my obsessive reading about music, art, business, and the role that creativity plays in diverse fields. Also, from what I prefer to call ‘pro-search’ – exploring the imaginations of others about the future.

More analytically, I used a survey that over 100 people from around the world responded to. This uncovered some fascinating information on how people think about their own creativity, the role it plays in their lives, and the conditions needed to trigger it. A detailed summary of the survey is in the Appendix, where you might be intrigued to find out which people are most commonly thought of as creative.

What’s interesting is how similar are many people’s descriptions of creativity, even though couched in different language. A significant finding of the research is that while most see creativity as key to their success and happiness in life, very few have ever received any coaching in it. This is why *Re-Think* was written.

## NAVIGATING THE BOOK

It would be great if colleges had to offer courses that combined a practical skill with book learning: Latin and metalwork, carpentry and theology, psychology and plastering might be a good start.

Similarly, *Re-Think* is about philosophy and plumbing – in other words, theory and practice. The first part of each chapter is philosophy/theory, followed by a number of re-thinks; more practical avenues for using the ideas.



*There are practical re-thinks throughout the book, which are indicated by the symbol in the margin. It will usually be an action – such as ‘buy a new newspaper’ – and sometimes a fresh idea to reflect upon.*

If you're standing in a bookshop skimming through *Re-Think*, you could read the whole of it by following these symbols in the text. However, sometimes understanding the why behind the idea can change your mind as much as the action. To get you used to this practical way of reading *Re-Think*, here's an example to start with.

*Using words without thought can be a barrier to thinking differently. One of the ways in which you can get a shot of re-thinking in the shortest time available is to have a dictionary of word origins in your bathroom. Not only will this impress visitors, but you'll often find a prompt that will open fresh ways of thinking.*

*Take a word like ‘disease’ for instance. More usefully, we can think of it as dis-ease. But what if we were to take this insight further? Given that stress creates or aggravates 80 per cent of all illnesses,*

*don't we need a Minister For Ease? And why shouldn't he or she be responsible for reducing stress and increasing ease in all areas of life: health, education, even transport, and dealing with social services?*

*So buy this dictionary, find a word that's relevant to a project you're working on at home or in the office, discover its origins and, as in the example above, explore its implications.*



The way to read this book is to have a specific problem or situation in your mind before you start a chapter; I'd advise one big one and one small one. Your mind will be more committed to resolving the issue if you write it down or even draw it before you start reading.

Don't navigate your way through the book passively. I encourage you to put it down – frequently – and consider, act upon, or discuss the ideas it introduces. There aren't many checklists in *Re-Think* because I'm not sure that they work. Mark the book, tear pages out, make it your own. You might find it useful to have a stack of Post-it Notes and a journal to sketch, and note the ideas that come to you while reading.

*Re-Think* encourages you to *experience* different ways of thinking, behaving, and being. It's a provocation, a series of insights, and a journey to inspire your creativity. I've intended the first four chapters to be the cornerstones and believe there is some value in reading them in order. But if I were you, I'd dip in anywhere that looks interesting, provided you agree to following the advice about writing down what it is you want to re-think before reading.

Re-thinking doesn't just come from intellectual analysis. Often a poem can set us thinking ...

## Things To Think

*Think in ways you've never thought before.  
If the phone rings, think of it as carrying a message  
Larger than anything you've ever heard,  
Vaster than a hundred lines of Yeats.  
Think that someone may bring a bear to your door,  
Maybe wounded and deranged; or think that a moose  
Has risen out of the lake, and he's carrying on his antlers  
A child of your own whom you've never seen.  
When someone knocks on the door, think that he's about  
To give you something large: tell you you're forgiven,  
Or that it's not necessary to work all the time, or that it's  
Been decided that if you lie down no one will die.*

*Robert Bly*<sup>1</sup>

Should you re-think everything? No – you'd go crazy. I believe there is a joy in continuity, in keeping some things the same, and preserving what's good. But when you need to be a re-thinker, here's how.

---

<sup>1</sup> 'Things to Think' from *Morning Poems*, Robert Bly, HarperPerennial, 1997, p. 12. Copyright © 1997 by Robert Bly. Reprinted by permission of HarperCollins Publishers.

re-think | one

# The way we see things

Our human blind spot is not the physical one at the point where nerves leave the retina of the eye, but our unconscious assumption that the world is as we see it. The one thing I cannot share with you, even if we are in love, is to perceive the world the way you do.

I'd like to draw you in to different ways of *experiencing* how our minds create the world we know. I have an unusual way of introducing myself at conferences. Instead of telling people about myself, about 15 minutes into a presentation I ask people to introduce *me* by responding to questions about my age, background, family, and so on.

Try it for yourself. Here's my photograph. Write down the answers in the spaces below:



Age .....

Education (if any) .....

Last real job (if any) .....

Marital status/kids .....

Car I drive .....

My dream car .....

Newspaper I read .....

Hobbies/interests .....

When I'm with an audience it's amazing what they can write about me in a couple of minutes. How do these impressions register so quickly? People readily answer that it's based on perception, experience, mannerisms, tone of voice, and a score of other tiny indicators. They are right in all this, but of course it doesn't stop them from getting most of the answers wrong.

You haven't had some of these cues, but it's unlikely to have stopped you making what you think are fairly accurate guesses!



My beard has a strong influence on people's answers. Although this is relatively recent in my life, it creates the perception that I studied psychology, sociology or something arty, drive a Volvo or Saab, am a member of Greenpeace, interested in saving the Welsh whale, knit my own yoghurt, and read a left-wing newspaper like the *Guardian*. In fact, most of this is incorrect, but it's extraordinary how immediate one small visual cue is in creating a whole, rich world of associations.

Of course, the answers don't matter. If you feel a bit cheated and are seriously interested, do email me. The point is that we are all making up a story of reality in our minds, which we rarely stop to reflect upon, and often unconsciously impose on others. For instance, I remember giving the task above to a Spanish group who said that I drove a Ford Mondeo.

'No, I don't.'

'Well, you *should*.'

They then took me on a test drive in one of their Mondeos at lunch-time!

The serious danger here is that you and I both stereotype people and problems – often based on limited or superficial information – and all of us have been stereotyped at some time in our life or career. So when somebody says, 'My first impressions are never mistaken', this is a self-fulfilling prophecy because it's rarely checked.

The amazing thing is how little conscious data we need to make up an inner story about other people and situations. Whenever you or I are a customer, we only need one experience with the restaurant, hotel, or shop before we have made up our minds to love or hate it. When people say to me that they needed *no* data to tell me a lot about myself, I don't think they are saying they are telepathic, but rather that we are not

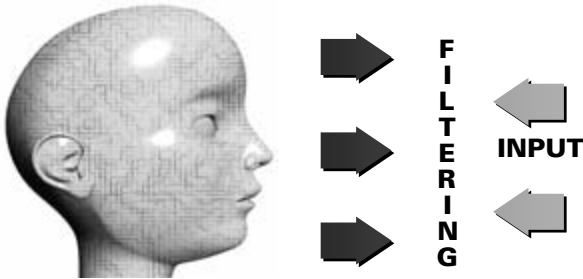
conscious of the thousands of bits of data our brains sift every second before producing a stereotyped, familiar picture of the world.



*The conclusion is startling: most of the time you and I are not thinking – we are merely stereotyping. Think about it.*

## How perception happens

### The grid of experience



The picture of the perceptual grid above is a highly simplified rendition of how we see the world. We receive input from the outside in a multi-sensory form, the brain processes this and comes up with (hopefully) an appropriate response. The scanning, testing, rejecting, and selecting amid countless alternatives happens with an immediacy that stops us being aware of the process itself.



*It's so automatic that if you put this book down and stare at whatever scene is now in front of you – go on, do it – a whole landscape of colours, shapes, and sounds will immediately spring up in front of you without any apparent conscious intervention. Think: what did I do to create it?*

You don't seem to *do* anything – it's all somehow *just there*. As if we have put on green sunglasses, everything appears green. The trouble is that the picture is constructed so instantly that we forget we have put the glasses on and that everything is being filtered through them.

An image that captures this memorably comes from an Irish policeman who would warn offenders off prison by saying:

*'How would you like to spend 90 days in the land of striped sunshine?'*

If we're not careful, it's possible for us to spend 90 years this way, looking out through the bars of our own perceptions.

Let's explore perception further. If I give you the input 'Kodak', what do you see? People immediately make the connection to cameras, and some even see the yellow of the company's livery. This was a great problem for Kodak some years ago when they were trying to promote Kodak photocopiers. When the potential customer heard the name, their perceptual grid had a rich history of associations that stereotyped Kodak as merely a camera company. 'Thank you, we've plenty of film, no need to call,' was the immediate reflex response. People in most fields will testify how hard it is to change the perceptions of others. Like Pavlov's dogs, we become conditioned.

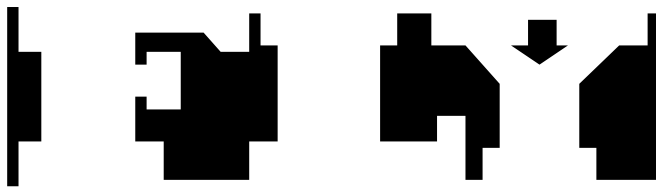
What's in a name? If I say to you, 'Personnel Department', I'm sure your grid immediately produces an association of highly underpaid people who do an invaluable job, should be promoted to the board tomorrow, and have their salary doubled. Or if I say to you, 'car salesperson', then quite clearly you see someone totally trustworthy, who you'd sign a blank cheque to now, and who you'd love your daughter to bring home. *No?*

Here it doesn't really matter what story you have in your grid. My point is that we have a large library of spontaneous associations, positive or negative, even when we just hear a name or label. Working with the tourist industry in Ireland recently (I love the idea of having whole countries, not just organizations and individuals, as clients), I tentatively tried the input that the English were actually highly misunderstood, passionate, and caring people in the countries they dominated in the past. Naturally, this led to a rather lively conversation, as several hundred years' worth of experience didn't quite match this proposition!

If we are to think more consciously, re-think, and re-interpret the world we see, it's necessary to be more aware of this matching process that our brains are doing for us thousands of times a day. We need to slow down or suspend the practice of making such selective judgements in order to allow fresh ways of seeing to become available to us.

As light travels at 700 million miles per hour, this 'slowing down' can't usually be in the mechanical sense of perception, but in the ways we interpret and think about the data we are getting into our brains. This is re-thinking.

However, 'getting' this idea intellectually is not enough to change the way we see things. Here's another visual experience – look at the image below. What is it?



I've known it to take several hours for someone to decipher this. If you can't wait that long, the answer is at the bottom of the page.<sup>1</sup> The 'so what?' is that once our perceptual grid has noted an answer, it relaxes, takes this to be *the* answer, and stops looking for *even better solutions*.

Most people's initial perception is that there are many answers here – it could be pieces of machinery, a factory layout, a tap, or an arrow. But once what looks like the optimum solution clicks into place, the search for new ones is at an end. We have lost our perceptual 'virginity': notice how the longer you look at the image, the more difficult it is to return to your original, more open-ended view.

I call this the *problem of experience*. Once we have seen a good enough solution, it takes a lot of effort, courage, and brainpower to look for even better ways. For instance, if we have a fair forehand at tennis or a reasonable golf swing, our average ability can be more of an inhibitor to change than if we were rank beginners.

There is no such thing as a perfect solution, but there can be a more perfect search for solutions.

Our brain tends not to go through this search process if it doesn't seem to fit immediate survival needs. Over time we may develop more fixed ways of seeing things, which is why ageing has been described as a 'hardening of the categories'. We've labelled the problem, put it in a box, and stopped learning.

This should help us become a little more aware about the way we see things. Understanding ourselves has been described as pulling ourselves up by our own bootlaces. Brilliant neuroscientist Antonio Damasio describes the process of having only our own brains with which to understand ourselves as 'dizzying'.

---

<sup>1</sup> Fly.

## Are we brainwashed?

We're all brainwashed to a degree. Not exactly in the ways used in wartime, ideological conditioning, interrogations, and cults, but in more subtle and insidious ways.

Don't believe it? Matthew Lieberman, a psychologist at the University of California, showed a research group photographs of black faces, all expressionless. In two-thirds of cases the brain's amygdala – often called the brain's panic button and responsible for our fight and flight response – was triggered. This was true for both black and white subjects, suggesting that social stereotypes are unconsciously picked up by us all, irrespective of what we might think consciously.

'Where Belief Is Born', Alok Jha, the *Guardian*, June 30, 2005.

Yet, self-awareness is a feature that more than anything distinguishes us from the instinctual nature of the animal kingdom. Biologist Julian Huxley described human nature as 'evolution become aware of itself'. It's just that our thinking process is so automatic and intimate to us that right from birth we have been thinking, while most of us have never stopped to consider what a thought is.

Let's see if you can intuitively capture the sense of *who* is doing all this perceiving, even just for a brief second.



*Withdraw your mind from the words you've been reading on this page. Sit still and allow yourself to relax and become aware of the one who is doing the perceiving. Do you get just the vaguest sense that the person who is you, looking out at the world through your eyes, is the same person you have always been, throughout all the external changes in your body and surroundings?*