

Bob Gunn, Editor

# Mr. Markwell's Wild Ride

BY ROBERT GUNN & BETSY RASKIN GULLICKSON

British surfer Martin Markwell had taken his wife Vicki and son Jake to a white-sand beach resort to escape winter's dreariness. On a beautiful Sunday morning, he paddled out on his surfboard when a big wave came along—a really, really big wave. It was even bigger

than the “perfect wave” that Markwell, like every surfer, had always dreamt of. The resort was on Sri Lanka's southern coast. The date was December 26, 2004. And Markwell's wave was a tsunami.

“As an experienced surfer, when I saw the wave come I realized something was wrong,” Markwell was quoted, “but I couldn't escape because my surfboard was tied to my ankle.” So, he says, he got up on his board and rode atop the tsunami until he reached a restaurant on the second story of a hotel, jumped off, and waded to safety.

Skeptics may raise their eyebrows. But the Reuters news service believed the story. And principles of mental functioning explain how it's possible.

In every situation, humans can draw upon two sets of resources. One we call *earned capabilities*. These are the skills, tools, methods

we've developed through learning and experience. We may acquire them with great effort and even suffering. We begin with certain talents, but we invest a lot of sweat equity to develop—to earn—our capabilities.

At the same time, we all are born with another pool of resources, one that holds things such as insight, intuition, common sense, Mother Wit, and creativity. These can't be taught in school; they don't have steps we can memorize. Sometimes muted, but universally present, these resources stem from what we call *innate capacity*.

Without *earned capabilities*, our *innate capacity* is stuck in neutral; insights surface, but we have no way to put them into action. Without *innate capacity*, we often end up spinning our wheels in a game of “ready, fire, aim.”

We've discussed *earned capabilities* and *innate capacity* in this column

before (see January 2004). Since that time, several popular books that consider how thinking translates into action by drawing on current scientific research have been published. Each book takes a different approach, and none uses the exact terminology we've adopted, but they all point to the dynamic we're describing.

In *On Intelligence*, author Jeff Hawkins (a founder of Palm Computing and Handspring), with Sandra Blakeslee, shares his passion for understanding the neocortex, what he calls “the seat of intelligence,” the part of the brain that really sets man apart from other animals. The neocortex receives sensory information and channels it through a hierarchical system into patterns. From those patterns, Hawkins contends, the brain “predicts” experience, the primary function of the neocortex and the very foundation of intelligence. “Your brain has made a model of the world,” Hawkins says, “and is constantly checking that model against reality.”

The better ingrained a pattern is, the less mental energy the brain needs to put into it. For example, when we were learning to drive a car, we sweated over every twist and

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turn. Now that driving is well “patterned,” we may find ourselves miles down the highway without conscious recall of exactly what we’ve passed. Of course, if a squirrel darts across the road, our attention snaps back. Habituation frees the neocortex to call attention to anything different from the pattern or that defies “predictability.”

The pieces of patterns collected in the neocortex as memory can be thought of as *earned capabilities*. *Innate capacity* transcends those pieces, sees the whole, and opens to what Hawkins describes as the “sensation of sudden comprehension, the ‘a-ha!’ moment.” He writes, “Experts and geniuses have brains that see structure of structure and patterns of patterns beyond what others do. You can become expert by practice, but there certainly is a genetic component to talent and genius, too.”

That inborn, nonanalytical component is also noted in *Presence*, written by Peter Senge, C. Otto Scharmer, Joseph Jaworski, and Betty Sue Flowers. The authors interviewed cognitive psychologist Eleanor Rosch, who cites research identifying three major neural networks in the body. Naturally, there’s the brain, which is the largest, but

there are also major clusters of neurons in the intestinal tract and the cardiac sac. Rosch says, “It seems that there is really a physiological basis for ‘gut knowing’ and ‘knowing of the heart,’” or, in the terminology we’re using here, for *innate capacity*.

The phenomenon of “gut instinct” is at the center of journalist Malcolm Gladwell’s *Blink*. He cites numerous examples of individuals who earned their expertise in an area through experience and study but succeeded in the flow of events not by analysis but with “snap judgments.” For example, Gladwell quotes Paul Van Rider, a now-retired Marine who came back from the Vietnam War to make a career of understanding the art of war. “When we talk about analytic versus intuitive decision making,” Van Rider summarizes, “neither is good or bad. What is bad is if you use either of them in an inappropriate circumstance....If you get too caught up in the production of information, you drown in the data.”

Gladwell also spent time with two women who run a company that tests food and beverage products for major manufacturers. They “don’t just taste food. They dream about food. Having lunch with them is like going cello shopping with Yo-Yo Ma or dropping in on Giorgio Armani one morning as he is deciding what to wear.” As a result, these two women can instantly distinguish subtleties in a bite of food or a sip of cola that almost all of us would miss. “The gift of their expertise is that it allows them to have a much better understanding of what goes on behind the locked door of their unconscious,” Gladwell observes. He adds, “The first impressions of experts are *different*....When we become expert in something, our tastes grow more esoteric and complex. What I mean

is that it is really only experts who are able to reliably account for their reactions....Knowledge gives their first impressions resiliency.”

Gladwell concludes, “This is the gift of training and expertise—the ability to extract an enormous amount of meaningful information from the very thinnest slice of experience.” In other words: The more we’ve developed our *earned capabilities*, the more secure we can be in relying on our *innate capacity*.

When Markwell saw that monster wave coming at him, he didn’t have time to analyze angles, recall techniques, or worry about proper form. He had to stay calm, focused, and present—drawing on his *innate capacity*. Of course, that wouldn’t have been enough. Markwell was an “experienced surfer.” He’d put a lot of time and effort into his chosen sport. Countless hours and countless waves. His *earned capabilities* were ready to answer the direction of his *innate capacity*. In short, as neuroscience indicates, the seamless integration of *earned capabilities* and *innate capacity* enables miracles like Mr. Markwell’s wild ride. ■

*Bob and Betsy have expanded their “Best Practices” columns in a book being published this month, On the High Wire: How to Survive Being Promoted (Praeger Publishers). A portion of proceeds will be donated to IMA. For further information, visit [www.amazon.com](http://www.amazon.com).*

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