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A CHANGE FOR OTHERS IN THE WIND

It's Tuesday 10 September 2013 and my early morning train approaches Asquith station in Sydney's northern suburbs. It is here where I step aboard to take my regular journey to the office as part of the working week.

As my station is one of the first on the line, the platform traffic is usually light, so I am always able to sit for the entire journey.

The regular shuffle towards the doorway takes place as my transport pulls to a halt and I make my way inside. Spring is a beautiful time of the year in Sydney. New leaves are taking shoot to replace those lost for the winter as, once again, colour begins to return to the city. So, with my coat laid across my knees, I was expecting I would be taking in the usual cycle of endless flashes of light then dark mixed with intermittent split-second focus as the world goes by.

For a while I survey a few familiar faces opposite, being mindful not to stare, much less make eye contact while I make note of the mass of mobile phones, books or listening devices in use, remembering an era when good old-fashioned conversation would pass the time.

I was then reminded of the book given to me by my daughter Adele and my commitment I had made to finish it. I opened *Sun Stand Still* by US Pastor Steve Furtick. Pulling it out I settle in to bury my thoughts within the pages. To

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this day I have never been so captivated by any paragraph like the one I read that day:

"So, why is it that so many believers default on their potential to see God do the impossible in their lives They feel like they're doing their part as long as they live decent lives. Stay out of trouble. Pay taxes. Have babies. Make a living. Buy a boat. Hit age fifty-nine and a half. Collect retirement. Die."

I was already starting to think there was more to life than just making money and delivering software changes. At age 59, and I expect like many men I have come to know since, I had increasingly experienced fleeting thoughts around what else I could be doing with my life.

For most of my working life I had a strong focus on trying to earn more money to support my wife and our four children, as we sometimes struggled financially. Despite a lack of formal tertiary qualifications, I had managed to progressively rise to senior IT management roles where I managed the development and support of various IT applications across the Australian and New Zealand telecommunications and energy utilities. It was important to me to be regarded as "successful" so early in my working life I started some side businesses to earn more money; these included running a milk bar, building a network marketing business and importing and wholesaling tennis and squash rackets. All of these were developed while in full-time permanent roles. But that book, in fact that single paragraph, had planted a seed somewhere in my subconscious that would soon reveal itself. And the list really had me thinking.

As I read through it again, I mentally ticked off each of the items – I even had a boat!! Then when I read *"hit age fifty-nine and a half"* the message really sunk in. I was born on 10 March 1954 – I was fifty-nine and a half to that actual day! I was obviously meant to read that, but why would an author say retire at "fifty-nine and a half" and not a normal retirement age like sixty, sixty-five or seventy? I had no idea what it would be, but I had a strong sense that a significant change in my life was about to take place.

The following weekend my wife, Helen, and I went for our morning walk. While we were sitting having coffee Helen left the table to talk to another woman I had never met before. When she returned, she explained that this woman, Gab, was our daughter Adele's scripture teacher (the daughter who had given

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me *Sun Stand Still*). With the paragraph still fresh in my mind I went over to say hello. Immediately goodness, kindness and love radiated from Gab. After our initial introduction and chat Gab went on to tell us of two initiatives she was involved in.

The first was a young mum's group where she and her husband provided food and love to mostly single mums to support them through difficult times in their lives. The second was the Raise Foundation where volunteer mentors provide mentoring support to high school students.



From that single meeting Helen and I committed to financially support the Young Mums group and also to complete the Raise Foundation mentor training course.

Who would have thought from a single meeting with Gab that such a huge directional change would take place? Yet just a few short months later I had quit my job as an IT manager and concentrated on mentoring high school kids through the Raise Foundation. It was now May 2014 and I had walked away from my traditional role. Why? Because it felt right. Later on, I also mentored primary school kids through the Kids Hope program and became a coordinator for the COACH family mentoring program. In between I also found the time to look after three of my twelve grandkids on a part-time basis.

Ian Help Me!

By 2018, I was mentoring at multiple Sydney-based schools, including mentoring a young high school student whose father had suicided and whose mother had an addiction problem that would see her in and out of rehab for treatment. He was living with his grandparents which he hated. At one point in one of our mentoring meetings he turned and looked at me. What came next, I wasn't expecting, leaning in he started crying and he said the saddest words, "Ian help me!"

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When later debriefing with the mentoring program coordinator I explained the situation to seek her advice. I was in new territory here. The coordinator asked if I was okay, and I found myself crying about the situation. I felt flat for months before realising, that I myself wanted, no, needed, to talk to a “life” mentor to feel supported – just like the mentoring I had provided to many people over the previous years.

I searched the internet for a suitable organisation for men but found nothing. It became obvious that there was a big gap in the Australian mentoring landscape. There was no widely available free program for adult men, a group that arguably needed mentoring more than any other group.

It was then that I decided to write a proposal to establish a new mentoring program called **Mentoring Men** that focused solely on supporting men. Within a couple of weeks of preparing the proposal I attended an event organised by Lifeline Harbour to Hawkesbury and Julian Leeser, the Federal MP for Berowra, which was aimed at encouraging representatives from all the community groups in Julian’s electorate to be trained in a Lifeline suicide awareness course. I clearly remember Julian’s stirring speech about the suicide of his father and, after the meeting, I raised the idea of **Mentoring Men** with him. His response was extremely encouraging and supportive. Was this my calling? Quite possibly, but at that precise point I made a commitment to myself that I would do everything within my power to make **Mentoring Men** happen.

Julian also signed on as our **Mentoring Men** ambassador and he has played a key role in helping **Mentoring Men** progress to where it is today.

Mentoring Men

Today the **Mentoring Men** mission is *“Supporting men in their life journey”*. We believe that all men should lead a connected and fulfilling life.

The core of **Mentoring Men** is having a trained and validated volunteer male mentor support another man through at least a six-month one-to-one mentoring relationship. The man being mentored may be experiencing things like loneliness, isolation, grief, job loss, relationship breakdown or perhaps they are just stuck in life.

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The **Mentoring Men** program focuses on early intervention and prevention. For example, supporting a man who has just experienced job loss rather than allowing him to spiral down as addictions develop, relationships break down and he is considering self-harm. Personally, I believe we need to move some of the focus away from crisis support towards prevention – and this is what **Mentoring Men** does so well.

There are numerous men's support organisations available, and we have already formed partnerships with several of these, but my experience is that men are far more likely to open up and share the deep, tough stuff in a trusted one-to-one mentoring relationship rather than in a group environment. While this one-to-one mentoring approach is more labour intensive, it is far more effective.

I strongly believe that if we can help men become better men through mentoring then we will significantly reduce many of the main issues currently impacting our society, including domestic violence, relationship breakdown, intolerance of minority groups and addiction.

Earlier Moments in Time

Looking back on my life, I realise there have been several other Moments in Time that I now see have played a crucial role in preparing me for my later life purpose. In the early to mid-1960s my father would take my brothers and me to join some of his mates and their sons on camping holidays in the Strzelecki Ranges in Gippsland. A big part of these events centred around guns and shooting different animals, including rabbits, wombats, dingoes, snakes and wedge-tailed eagles. The adults would classify these animals as "vermin", but I hated this killing so, while the others went out spotlighting at night to shoot, I would stay back at the tent site questioning my masculinity. Am I a real man if I don't want to kill things?

The challenges I experienced as a high school student with a lack of self-esteem, anxiety and shyness led to poor decision-making. I went from being the dux of a large primary school to initially failing my Higher School Certificate because of the peer group pressure not to do any work (all my mates failed too). In later years when I was mentoring students, I could easily recognise the pattern, understand exactly how they would find themselves in this position and was able to talk about ways to work around those pressures.

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The early death of my mother at age 58 was an extremely difficult time for me. She was the person I felt closest to in my early years and, to me, was simply irreplaceable. Yet for reasons that still escape me, possibly confusion around manhood, I didn't shed a tear at her funeral.

On the other hand, my relationship with my father, a World War II veteran, **could best be described as distant** during much of my childhood and this gave me a greater perspective on what many others experienced. I should add, my relationship improved significantly with my father when I too became a father.

Do It Yourself!

In 1993 I identified a need to encourage people who have successfully navigated adversity to share their story to provide hope and inspiration to others who may be experiencing similar challenges. Although I felt strongly about the benefit and importance of a book covering this topic, I doubted



my ability to deliver one. So I wrote to well-known entrepreneur Dick Smith suggesting that he champion the book. Dick sent a handwritten letter back to me saying he thought the book was an excellent idea and then added, "Ian, you should do it yourself."

Following a great deal of encouragement from Helen, I made a decision in 1995 to quit my role as a permanent employee after twenty-two years at a large Australian corporation to take up a contract role in Auckland, New Zealand. This decision enabled me to start to set up an income stream that would provide the opportunity to leave paid work in 2014. I have been a full-time volunteer since.

Also the mentoring relationship developed with Dr Marlene Hickin has

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been absolutely paramount in enabling me to identify my strengths. Marlene's wisdom, support and encouragement instilled self-confidence in me to take on new opportunities.

In December 2015, Helen and I started hosting men's breakfasts at our Asquith home in Sydney. The breakfasts were open to all men and there would be a couple of guest speakers who would speak on topics related to men's health, welfare and interests. The breakfasts grew in popularity with around seventy men attending. The breakfasts also gave an insight into the common challenges that many men experience, and they proved to be a great forerunner to the **Mentoring Men** program.

My first live **Mentoring Men** interview on Community Radio in 2019 didn't go as I expected. I had typed out the questions I was expecting as well as my answers, and then sat in my car opposite the radio station feeling very anxious and praying for the right words to say. During the interview the radio host asked unexpected questions, so I rephrased his question so I could give the answer I had prepared! This was great preparation for a subsequent live television interview about **Mentoring Men** on Sky News in 2019. I am now regularly interviewed via various media forms and also provide **Mentoring Men** presentations to community and corporate groups with only minor levels of anxiety!

In 2019, I was promoting **Mentoring Men** at a small local market in Lindfield, Sydney, where I met a woman whose son had suicided. She and her husband play a very active role in suicide prevention and support. Her husband immediately signed on as a volunteer mentor and also made us aware of an opportunity in the South Western Sydney (SWS) Primary Health Network (PHN) to implement mentoring as part of a project to "Proactively Reduce Male Suicide". The SWS PHN is one of 31 geographic based PHNs in Australia who each assess the healthcare needs of their local community and commission health services to meet those needs. **Mentoring Men** received a huge boost when we were awarded a contract under this project which enabled us to build strong relationships within the SWS PHN area including running our mentor training course in Arabic to Iraqi and Syrian refugees. This initiative was widely reported including being featured on SBS news during Refugee Week in 2021, as well as newspapers and radio stations. The SWS contract with **Mentoring Men** has been extended and other PHNs are looking to do something similar.

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Without these Moments in Time, I believe I would have continued paid work – which would have increased our personal wealth but the many lives that have been transformed, even saved, through Mentoring Men would not have happened. I would also have missed a key opportunity to experience the joy and fulfilment of giving back.

I didn't realise it at the time, but as I look back it has become increasingly clear to me that my life experiences, especially the challenges, have played a key part in preparing me for what has become a clear purpose for my life during my sixties.

If there is any advice I could give to others – men and women – it is this. Attempt to do the things that you feel called to do and understand that this will require sacrifice. I totally underestimated the level of work involved but I did it anyway.

Be open to a greater purpose. Our Western environment often encourages self-centredness, but I believe true happiness and fulfilment comes from giving back. Understand that many of the tough challenges we face in life could be preparing us to play our part in making the world a better place.

Many of the people I have met on this journey shared with me their own dreams, some of which went back many years, but to date they have not been effective in making the dream happen. I'm not sure how to help them with this, except to say that I made a decision in 2022 to continue the project I first identified in 1993 and raised with Dick Smith, but did not have the confidence, time and the money to do until now.


My mind often returns to the train back in 2013 and how a simple paragraph in Steve Furtick's book set the wheels in motion for a string of life-changing moments, not just for me, but for the many I have had the privilege to mentor. Had I not read this, would I have heard Gab's words so intently, would it have hit home, and would the timing have been right? I can only assume not ... I believe we all experience our own Moments in Time, which shape who we become later in life – and what we choose to do. I hope that through reading the real-life stories in this book you will feel encouraged, even compelled, to seize and run with your own calling.

**“The two most important days in your life are
the day you are born and the day you find out why”
- Mark Twain**




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On 10th September 2013, Ian experienced a life changing moment that led to his decision to retire from paid work in May 2014, and commence a volunteer mentoring career.

Ian initially volunteered with the Raise Foundation, Kidshope and COACH mentoring programs, and then in 2018, after experiencing a life challenge himself, he searched for an organisation that provided free, long-term, one to one, 'life' mentoring to Australian men.

He was surprised and disappointed to find that no suitable program existed; especially for a demographic that historically struggles with vulnerability and who would benefit from having someone support them in their life journey. In response, Ian commenced development of the Mentoring Men program in June 2018, and the program was officially launched by Julian Leeser, Federal Member for Berowra in November 2018.

Ian has been married to Helen for thirty-nine years and they have four children and twelve grandchildren.