

# A Tolling Bell

by Gus Griffin

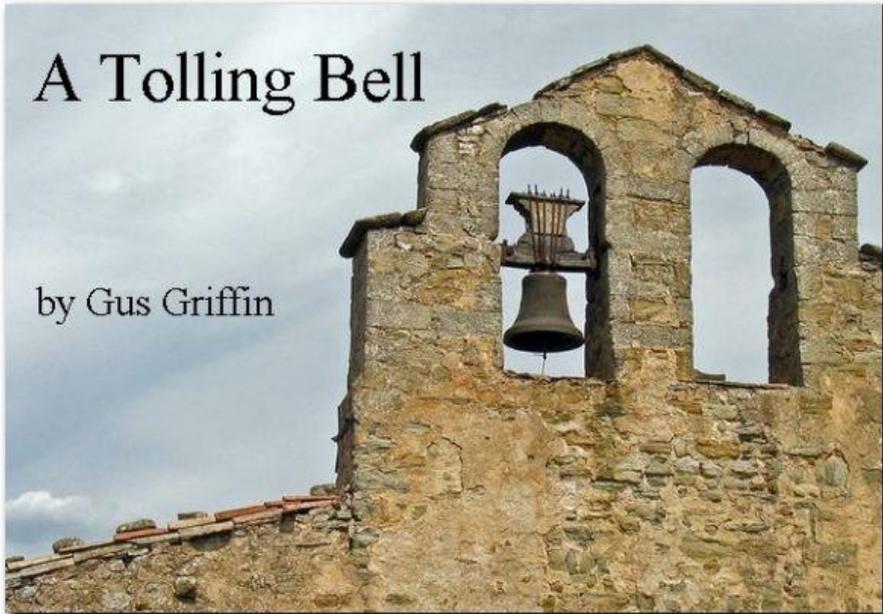


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People ask me why I developed **Instinx**<sup>®</sup>. What they also want to know by this is, “*Where are you really coming from, Gus?*”

Here’s the story—it will answer both questions.

First, a little background about myself. I got off to an early start in my career, writing ad campaigns for multi-nationals before my 18th birthday—ultimately on three continents—for the likes of TWA, Alitalia, Air India, Mitsubishi, P&O, Kodak, AGFA, 3M, BASF, Remy Martin, Campari, etc.

That was in the 70s. In the 80s, in Australia, I ran across videotex— forerunner to the Internet—and got hooked by the vast untapped marketing potential of cyberspace. I pioneered pre-internet comms & marketing: designing & launching the first telex/email interchange in Australia, designing & manufacturing cutting-edge computer and display terminals, marketing electronic sporting aids, inventing online market research methods, that sort of thing.

Through leading such initiatives, I came to focus on management more than marketing, eventually putting this experience to work as partner in a venture capital firm: forging management teams for new ventures and shepherding them toward productivity and profitability.

In other words, I was fully invested in hi-tech industry. But in 1988 something happened to change all that. On a round-the-world business tour I ran into something I hadn’t bargained for.

The trip was basically a series of negotiations with corporations in Hong Kong, Tokyo, LA, Vancouver, New York, Boston, London and Singapore. Familiar with most of these cities, I was stunned by the pollution that had built up since last I was there. The oil-slicked harbour of Hong Kong, the gritty greyness covering Tokyo, the poisonous air of LA—all revolted my senses.

If I'd been a newcomer the impact might have been less, but I remembered these places in better times. I looked in vain for the bracing tang, the vibrant colours and friendly breezes of days gone by—and was appalled.

As my journey progressed, it became ever more apparent just how badly humankind was fouling its own nest. Puzzled by how 'we' could let things get this bad, I couldn't help asking the executives with whom I was doing business what they thought about it. And the reactions I encountered in boardrooms around the world were doubly fascinating.

There were various responses, but underlying them all was an odd displacement of responsibility: a "*Yes it's terrible, I wish they'd do something about it*" attitude. But who was "they"? These people ran many of the companies doing the polluting, though they seemed unaware of it. They had little or no recognition of themselves as causal agents.

You might think they were passing the buck, but that wasn't it. Unaware of ducking the issue, they did feel truly concerned about the problem. These industrial power-brokers honestly hoped 'someone' would come along to solve 'pollution'.

From my years in advertising, I recognised a unique opportunity to conduct 'market research' at normally inaccessible heights of the corporate world. So my trip became an informal survey of the ruling classes of industry on the environment ... *and everywhere I found this same eerie disconnection factor.*

I came to see how completely the situation was out of control. Most people think industrial leaders deliberately ignore the need to adapt to changing ecological conditions. But there's nothing deliberate about it!

Imagine being aboard a runaway train. You race forward to the engine, wondering what's gone wrong ... and find the engineer leaning against the wall, wondering why no-one has shown up to apply the brakes! That's how bizarre it looked to me then—and still does today.

I got quite arrogant about it, affecting a superior 'how benighted you are' attitude toward my corporate colleagues. When I got back home, however, the penny finally and painfully dropped.

It hit me that *I was exactly the same as those I was judging*. In the entire trip it hadn't once occurred to me that I was a causal agent in all of this too. Throughout my career I had aided and promoted many major polluters. I helped new polluters get up and running. My own

ventures polluted. And while shaking my head at other people's unawareness and denial, I'd been oblivious to my own.

Ouch.

There's an old proverb: *never send to know for whom the bell tolls, it tolls for thee*. Well, I could certainly hear it now, though I soon wished I couldn't. No matter which way I turned, it seemed impossible to pursue 'business as usual' without doing the wrong thing. *Oh, why couldn't I have minded my own business?*<sup>1</sup>

### **Now what?**

But there was no going back—what was 'my business' had changed. So I had to adapt, didn't I? It seemed the logical thing to do was look for a way to bring my existing talents and assets to bear on the problem. But what *was* the problem exactly?

On the face of it, it looked like global industry—with the complicity of billions of consumers—was destroying our host environment. That seemed to be it in a nutshell.

However, as any manager worth her salt will tell you, the only one who truly understands a problem is the one who can fix it. Any fool can state what he thinks the problem is (and most do), but if that doesn't reveal how to resolve it—with some solution that can be implemented *right away*—well, you're really just getting in the way.

My first instinct was to find someone whose solution made sense and throw my support behind them. However, despite searching for months, *I couldn't find one*.

I found lots of fast talkers making lucrative careers out of 'reasons why', but no remedy that actually *met* the situation: a) at the necessary order of magnitude, b) utilising readily developable resources, and c) implementable within a likely window of opportunity.

Various 'silver bullet' solutions called for innovations which didn't exist yet. Naive plans for government controls blithely ducked the issue of how to get politicians actually mandating the measures prescribed. And most common of all, mitigation strategies sought to 'patch' some

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<sup>1</sup> Truth be told, I *didn't* want to ignore it. Here finally, 18 years into my working life, I felt something fierce and remarkable kindling inside of me. As Mark Twain said: *The two most important days of your life are the day you were born and the day you find out why*.

part of the problem, but left it to the Fates whether the aggregate of all such patches would somehow be enough.

To most people it seems reasonable, if you don't have the entire answer now, work with what you've got and build things up from there. But Sun Tzu pointed out the fatal flaw in that logical fallacy over two thousand years ago: *victorious warriors win first and then go to war, while defeated warriors go to war first and then seek to win.*<sup>2</sup>

Here then was my starting point: though I knew many in my field more competent to take this on, none had actually done so. To find out what the *real* problem was, I'd have to work it out myself.

Effectively appointing myself management consultant to our whole darn species, this showed me how to bring my expertise to bear. Always the first step for any client, I began by verifying I was indeed addressing humankind's most pressing need: which proved easy enough to confirm.

Despite all the threats we faced back in 1988 for nuclear holocaust (this was two years *before* the Berlin Wall came down), pandemics and other doomsday scenarios, the environment did loom larger and more urgent than all the rest: because the others were *possibilities*, whereas there was no 'maybe' about the damage being wrought by pollution. Aware of it or not, our intrepid captains of industry had long since entered into the planetary demolition game.

In all, it took me almost a year of intensive research, and trial and error, to hit bedrock on what was causing humankind to be its own greatest threat to survival.

### **Finding Bottom**

The 'hard science' side of things was relatively easy to fathom. I soon eliminated the usual excuses for "having to pollute". Despite all the spin to the contrary, existing technology *could* enable industry to operate sustainably if its leaders wanted to.

But the next question was: who would pay for it? Could it be an *economic* problem? Corporations and customers the world over behaved as though they *couldn't afford* to make more eco-friendly choices. Perhaps all that was needed was to demonstrate that 'green is gold'.

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<sup>2</sup> A classic illustration of this difference is how George W Bush and his successors have been unsuccessfully 'seeking to win' in Afghanistan and Iraq, compared to the comprehensive manner in which FDR and his Allies vanquished the Axis back in WWII.

Setting out to test that, I focused on making a range of client companies *more ecofriendly* in ways that would also make them *more profitable*. And to begin with, we did achieve promising results.

But every time, no matter how much profits increased, clients balked at following up on the initial success. Something always “regretfully prevented” them from reinvesting in even more sustainable practices.

I learned that, with a little ingenuity, demonstrating green really *is* gold is not all that difficult. But getting senior management to adopt it *as their regular way of doing business* was another thing entirely!

To be clear: my clients cooperated willingly, but in *every* case, even though we *proved* that ‘being more green’ was ‘making more gold’ in their own ventures, for some reason they couldn’t bring themselves to put more eggs in the greener basket *on their own initiative*.

I could have kept on talking them into it, but that wasn’t the point. I needed to know why they weren’t already eradicating pollution. Now I knew for damn sure that economics was just an excuse, not the real issue.

If profit wasn’t enough to motivate the change, what else would it take? Digging deeper it seemed I had overlooked a fundamental maxim of public relations: *communication precedes action*. In technical terms: two-way discourse generates rapport which in turn engenders cooperation. In street terms: *the way to incite desired action, if you can’t command it, is through sparking sufficient discussion*.

The key word being ‘sufficient’. You may have to stimulate discourse for several years, even decades, fanning its growth all the while, to elicit the changes in behaviour you want to see. (For instance, the abolition of slavery in Europe & the Americas took almost a century to unfold.) But you *will* eventually get there, *if you keep on stirring up people to talk about it ... and talk about it again ... and again*.

This made me realise how much *more* discussion was needed: not only inside polluting enterprises, but also in political bodies perpetuating the status quo *and* the communities keeping them in power. Taking that lesson to heart, I founded—*Terra Pura: Management Consultants to Ecofriendly Enterprise*—and began spreading the word.

As a result, on World Environment Day in 1989, I found myself standing at a podium talking to some 500 community leaders—government ministers, officials, educators and leading business-people—on: *What Business Can Do About the Greenhouse Effect*.

As with my trip, however, this day was not destined to go as planned. As my turn to speak approached, a sense of disquiet stole over me, but before I could spot what was bothering me I was called to the podium.

Shrugging off my agitation, I tuned in to the array of expectant faces before me and began working the room. Getting into my stride, it felt the talk would turn out ok after all.

But then something shattering happened. All of a sudden, I couldn't speak: like an express train thundering out of the dark, the devastating reality of our true situation finally hit me.

### **The Bottom Line**

As I stood looking out over the crowd that day, abruptly I knew, with sickening certainty, I was wasting my breath. Every speaker that day was wasting his or her breath. Not only here, but in every other Environment Day event around the world. It ... was ... all ... pointless.

*None* of it would be enough. Like some cosmic judge rapping his gavel, passing sentence on the human race, a clap of doom reverberated through my soul.

This had nothing to do with the audience's mood: most were interested, willing, nodding in agreement. Many had already demonstrated real ability to make a difference. But finally I could see what I'd only glimpsed in those boardrooms overseas, what I was really up against with my change-averse clients. Though it stared me in the face the whole time, only now did I know it for what it was.

*We just didn't have what it takes.* Like the mice in the fable debating the belling of the cat, no matter how much more talking and planning we did, no matter what tech we developed, we, the Human Race, would never be equal to the magnitude of the task; not in the time available to us.

*Our pace of adaptation had no chance of overtaking our impeding conservatism within the handful of decades available to us.*

Stumbling through my talk somehow, I got away as soon as I could to try to come to terms with what I'd just seen. I'd been attacking this problem for almost a year—not mere theorising, but in practical coal-face applications. Every week I met people pursuing ecofriendly goals and that day I'd mingled with hundreds of like-minded, capable individuals. I had learned a lot about the 'human resources' available.

But in that devastating moment up on stage, I'd seen past the heartening willingness on display and realised *it was contained and delimited by a more intractable unwillingness*. Like some scene in a fairy tale, the kingdom lay exposed before me, benumbed under a malevolent spell.

Several psychological concepts hint at this very human limitation we all share—perceptual distortion, cognitive bias & dissonance, prejudice, confabulation—all of which fall under the psycho-neurological heading of *cognitive flexibility*.

In practical terms, what it boils down to is this: *we humans only solve the problems we allow ourselves to see*.

When life gets too 'hard', a built-in mental shock absorber reflexively kicks in to cushion the blow. It's actually an instinctive 'reality evasion' reaction. Going into shock is a severe manifestation of this mechanism, but milder forms of it *affect us on a daily basis*.

Whenever you feel *difficulty* or *disappointment*, it's a sign that your *tolerance threshold* is being exceeded: the *relevance* of your behaviour drops in direct proportion to how difficult any activity feels. It signifies that *neural overload* is impeding your brain's ability to select appropriate responses to events. You can no longer see the problem clearly.

Collectively, it is the same mechanism that is preventing us from confronting the reality of the global situation and responding accordingly. We humans pride ourselves on our adaptability, *but only because we have no more adaptable species to compare ourselves to*.

In fact, we're not nearly as adaptable to changing conditions as we could be. What was revealed to me up on stage that day was how far the problem actually exceeds the 'tolerance threshold' of our species as a whole. Not only for climate change deniers and relentless polluters, *but even for those 'converted' sincere supporters of sustainability*.

We were like Native Americans in the 1860s, loosing our arrows at the Iron Horse to try and stop it. For all the good we'd achieve in the end, we might as well go home now. Try to have less kids or something, so there'd be less suffering when the crunch came.<sup>3</sup>

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3 This should not be read as a criticism of so many fine people working hard for a sustainable future, but as a forecast. And subsequent events bear me out: *28 years later* NOAA reports the CO<sub>2</sub> level in our atmosphere is still climbing *at an increasing rate*. The *exponential pace* of pollution hasn't even slowed yet—to the contrary!

## The Naked Ape

*Phew*—heavy stuff. Environmentalists talk of an ‘oh shit’ moment—when the true magnitude of the planetary situation hits them. I thought mine came during my business trip, but it was nothing compared to this.

Unable to work, licking my mental wounds for weeks, I struggled to come to terms with the inevitability of it all. For lack of anything better to do, I poked through the ashes of my research, putting my notes in order.

I wasn’t looking for anything special, not consciously, but something did eventually draw my attention. It seemed trivial, like a shard of broken glass glinting in the ashes of my burned out house, but I poked at it anyway.

The *inconsistency* of the human capacity to adapt niggled at me. Why was it so *variable* in our race? What made it so?

In most species, like starfish, dung beetles or kookaburras, adaptability varies little from one organism to the next. In some, however, it varies a lot—especially cooperative mammals like wolves, dolphins and primates. The vast majority of the ape family *follow the lead of their most adaptable comrades*, and humans are no exception.

Instinctively, we establish pecking orders and choose ‘alphas’ to follow, ‘betas’ naturally reinforce their lead, and so on. To an uncanny degree, the more adaptive these alphas are, the more adaptable and successful is the human group led by them.

That might seem commonplace to you or me, but it’s not what happens with most species. To put it in street terms: anthills and beehives don’t thrive or fail according to the ability of their queens (rulers), *but human enterprises usually do*.

You’d think that the superior brain of humans would give us better self-direction, but observably the reverse is true when we interact with each other. It’s amazing how far down unfamiliar paths humans will follow their alphas: witness the Nazi Party and Jonestown, but also the self-sacrificing ways of followers of Florence Nightingale, Martin Luther King and Abdul Sattar Edhi. That extra brainpower of ours goes instead into emulating and reinforcing their lead.

Hence, adaptability of human institutions is *not* actually determined by how adaptable the average participant is, but rather by that very thin top stratum of our species: namely, the bosses or influencers the rest of us fall in line behind.

Social and political fashions aside, the biological truth is humans live in an *adaptarchy*—where the most adaptable people eventually get their way—and we always have.<sup>4</sup>

All of Nature, for that matter, functions as an adaptarchy—and no ‘-ism, -ology or -ocracy’ has ever enabled anyone to escape that reality indefinitely. Speaking zoologically, the human species as a whole is failing to adapt enough to meet the current environmental crisis *because* our alphas, our leaders, are failing to lead us to do so. That’s the only way it could happen with our particular species.

Thus the actual reason our race is failing to adapt quickly enough must either be: a) our most adaptable members aren’t adaptable enough, or b) there is not enough of them to go around to overcome the inertia of the overgrown institutions we’ve become prone to build since developing agriculture. Civilization has run away from its instinctive origins.

### **The Real Problem**

But here’s the puzzle: *not one of us is wholly adaptable*. Even among the most adaptable of us, there are strange inconsistencies in when they do or don’t adapt. A Fortune 500 CEO can’t houstrain his own pets. A medical paragon, saviour of thousands, can’t kick an addiction to kiddy porn. A Nobel Prize winning author fails over and over again at marriage.

No matter who you are, no matter how many are choosing to follow your lead, there *will* be ways you want to adapt, and yet cannot do so.

In some activities, when we humans see a better way to go about things, we just do it. Change comes easy. But in others, we watch ourselves doing what we know we shouldn’t, doggedly persisting to do it anyway. And we *keep on* doing it—often even at risk of life and limb or that of our loved ones. It’s clearly not knowhow we lack in these circumstances: so what the heck is it?

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<sup>4</sup> The complexities of modern society obscure this dynamic, but it’s there. We seldom see how naturally adaptive someone can be until adulthood when, having outgrown the worst effects of desensitizing schooling practices and debilitating role modelling, he or she ultimately gets in touch with their own innate powers.

Meanwhile, those gifted at regurgitating information are celebrated and win the plum jobs coming out of school—who seldom turn out to be very adaptable at all in the real world. But the cream of our race usually does eventually rise to their rightful level of influence—each in their own unique way—*as long as* he or she manages to stay alive and out of prison long enough to get there.

*This was the crux of the matter:* the point I finally saw could lead to an answer of sufficient magnitude to resolve the whole mess. If the industrial world, egged on by its supporting consumer base, was destroying our host environment simply because we're adapting too slowly—then what is it that causes the difference?

Yes, communication may precede action, *but what's the other variable that determines how much communication it takes to cause someone to engage in the desired action?* What magical elixir is present in the mind of those who do lead others to change appropriately, when they do—compared to the rest of us watching ourselves *not* change even though we want to?

Buckminster Fuller said: *You can never change things by fighting the existing reality. To change something, build a new model that makes the existing model obsolete.*

If I could isolate this leadership X-factor and somehow “bottle” it, perhaps we could then build Human Alpha 2.0: super-adaptable leaders and influencers—and lots more of them—to escalate the rate of global adaptation to what is truly needed.

Of course, here I was contemplating yet another silver bullet solution. Was it a trap? There was no telling how long it might take to achieve.

I decided to go ahead regardless. To be honest: it was the only answer I could find which appeared to meet the problem at the magnitude needed. In the absence of a more promising strategy, *it had to be worth pursuing.*

*It is necessary, therefore it is possible.* —Guiseppe Borghese

## **The Reason Why**

There you have it. The genesis of **Instinx Performance Coaching**: the mission that has held me in thrall since 1989.

We now know that every human being possesses the instinctive blueprint for super-adaptability within them, similar to how our DNA provides the blueprint for exceptional physical prowess. Capabilities similar to those we applaud in society's paragons—those most influential alphas we honour above all others—lie dormant within each of us.

And more to the point: we now know how to activate this superior instinctive adaptability within any individual who is currently mentally capable of performing a day's work or study—we are doing so daily.

Furthermore, we've reverse engineered the core algorithm the human brain uses to produce adaptive behaviour—and now use it to unjam any persisting personal inefficiency or resistance to change. (In time, this must eventually revolutionise clinical, industrial & sports psychology.)

In other words, your true adaptive potential has finally been mapped and it greatly exceeds what psychologists have ever led you to expect of yourself and your colleagues. We can measure exactly *how much better* you can get at any activity that interests you and then show you how to “switch on” that greater ability at the instinctive level. But we can't actualise it for you: this you must do yourself, under the guidance of an **Instinx Performance Coach**.

‘Realising your potential’ need no longer be the arduous hit and miss affair it has been up until now. The path is sure—all you need to do is walk it. And then, I trust, use it to make our world greener.

Gus

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