



COMMON INTEREST

THE BOOK

BECAUSE WE ARE STRONGER TOGETHER

CHAPTER ONE

Welcome and thank you for joining me!

Whether we're dealing with personal chaos, work, technology, or even nature, we have come to accept that we live in an age of relentless change, where the ground continually seems to be shifting. As a result, we face new hurdles on a daily basis. It's evident that we have to adapt if we want to be ahead of the curve.

Thankfully there are plenty of resources available to help us wade through these daily twists and turns. Several books, articles, blogs are around us to help. However, absorbing these resources could sometimes feel like drinking from a fire hose.

So, what do we need?

Apple picking. Have you done one? It's exciting and fun to be in the wilderness, delicious looking apples all around, grabbing the apples directly from the tree, taking a wholesome bite and - it makes you pucker, your face scrunches, eyes squint and lips pressed tightly. What did just happen? Sour. Do you sometimes feel the same reading a few pages from a promising book?

The answer is simple but not straightforward. Imagine the most delicious apple making it's way toward you everytime you reach for one. Sweet.

Likewise, what if we had a carefully selected and curated step-by-step guide presented itself to you for preparing you to handle these small and significant changes confidently.

Yes.

That is the central premise of COMMON INTEREST. A simple yet powerful way to build our wisdom around a wide-range of topics for everyday life. I term them as building blocks for shaping our foundation, thinking, conversation, and interaction with ourselves and others.

It's an experiment.

I don't have to admit that I don't have all the answers to the ways of life. However, we all collectively have enormous knowledge and experience, and most importantly, a noble desire to share with others. I subscribe to the philosophy that by sharing ideas, knowledge and experience, we grow and mature as a community. And even if you find yourselves taking sour bites once in a while, you know that through our collective sharing, we will turn that into something useful.



This is a humble attempt to share what I know (that you could use), and as a side effect, I too will continue to improve myself.

Share. That's what we do when we find something of value. If you like my post, I invite you to extend this thread by sharing your own experience and knowledge.

I will be back soon with topics of mutual interest, yet not very common. Stay tuned.

Success to you!

Razak
Common.Interest.

**If you want to run fast run
alone. If you want to run far
run together.**

African proverb

Back in 1946 when Germany was divided, a huge wall separating East and West Berlin was a center of the endless conflict. One day, some people in East Berlin took a truckload of garbage and dumped it on the West Berlin side. The stench could be smelled from miles.

The people of West Berlin decided to respond to this act of aggression. They took a truckload of canned foods, bread, milk and other provisions, and neatly stacked it on the East Berlin side, with a signboard saying “This is all we have to give.”

They could have acted in the same way as the people of East Berlin, but they didn't. Instead, they chose to respond with maturity and kindness.

This is not an easy behaviour. This requires wholesome character and discipline, which is the very foundation of who we are. You can only give what you have, and that is dependent on what our foundation is made of. You cannot offer hatred if you are filled with love. You cannot deceive others if integrity is all you know.

What do you have inside of you? Is it hate or love? Violence or peace? Death or life? Capacity to build or ability to destroy? What have you acquired over the years?



There are times when even the strongest wavers under a given circumstance. The essence of one's character shows how well and how soon one bounces back to their natural self. The stronger the roots, the longer you withstand. Best not to judge others and not be too hard on yourself. Let's face it. There will never be a perfect world, and we should accept it.

Forts and castles can be traced back to the time humans first started defining their territories and power over one another. It was a symbol of strength and superiority over other ruling powers. It took years to build and took sweat and blood from hundreds and thousands who toiled on making them.

Built over 5000 years ago, the old city of Aleppo, Syria has the oldest and the largest fortified castles in the world. Many civilizations and empires occupied the city. The castle dominated the culture that came with its inhabitants. Some cultures were plunderers whereas others were settlers. Some embalmed and enriched a decaying culture, whereas others impoverished a thriving one. Believed to be the strongest, the strength of the walls surrounding the castle was no match for some forces, the fort could not stop the invading cultures, and was forced to embrace them as they came.

The castle lies in ruin today, mostly due to decades of conflicts within the region. The conflicts are not new to the castle, but the invading forces are and have been. As though the time stood still for the castle ever since it was built millenniums ago, the new receding cultures continue to erode the vigour of the castle and metaphorically of its inhabitants.



Prison, on the other hand, also dating back to the beginning of civilization, as we know was built structurally strong similar to forts and castles, with one significant contrast. Unlike castles that were made to keep the uninvited out, the prisons were built to keep the inhabitants from escaping.

The primary purpose of the forts was to protect the inside from outside. The prisons purpose is to protect the outside from the inside.

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The [Berlin](#) experience provides an in-depth insight on our behaviour, which is led by our attitude, which is shaped through our association with others and our inner self (we will cover this topic in some detail later). Most of my growing years, I believed I could hold my stead firm against outside influence, which was not arrogance, but at best my immaturity. I did not know that the external control could sweep under my feet without my knowledge. It took years and some painful experiences for me to come to terms that I was, in fact, vulnerable to what was outside. That's when I learnt that having a safety net to break our fall is essential to our living.

Would you feel safe living in a house without walls and roofs? Building walls are your safety net.

Now I think you must have guessed by now how this relates to us.

Yes.

We need a castle and a prison inside us. We need to build a strong castle within us to keep the negatives from the outside at bay, and need a prison to avoid the negative in us from slipping out. As much as we need to protect and defend ourselves from the outside, we need to protect the outside from us as well. It goes both ways. If each of us welcomes the good with open arms and lock out the bad from within, we will leave this world a bit better than how we found it.

Gollum teaches us some very essential lessons.

If Smeagol had strong [walls](#) within him, he wouldn't have become obsessed with evil, killing his best friend, living an unnaturally long life in despair and become Gollum, finally melting away with the One Ring. Now, that probably wouldn't have given us the epic story 'The Lord of the Rings' either.

Smeagol was overtaken or invaded by the evil eyes of Sauron forcing him to be obsessively fanatic about the Ring, his only possession. It drove him crazy enough to go to any length to protect or get back his Ring. Strangely, there was also many glimpses of kindness and caring nature seen within him through his journey till the end. [The castle and the prison walls were both at play](#), however not strong enough to protect himself and others from his evil desires.

In life, we sometimes unknowingly mistake wrong "Precious" as the purpose of our lives, harming ourselves and others.

How do we allow ourselves to remain the good old Smeagol and not become Gollum?

Let's try this simple exercise: Downloadable file available here [[Back to Basics I My Precious I Self-Help](#)].

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[Castle walls to protect ourselves](#)

> Search for three characteristics that you want your castle to reflect your personality. Think of the qualities you admire most in others. Qualities that you prefer others speaking behind your back.

The following will help you understand if you have cracks in your castle walls. They provide subtle signs that your castle walls need some immediate attention to stop the invasion:

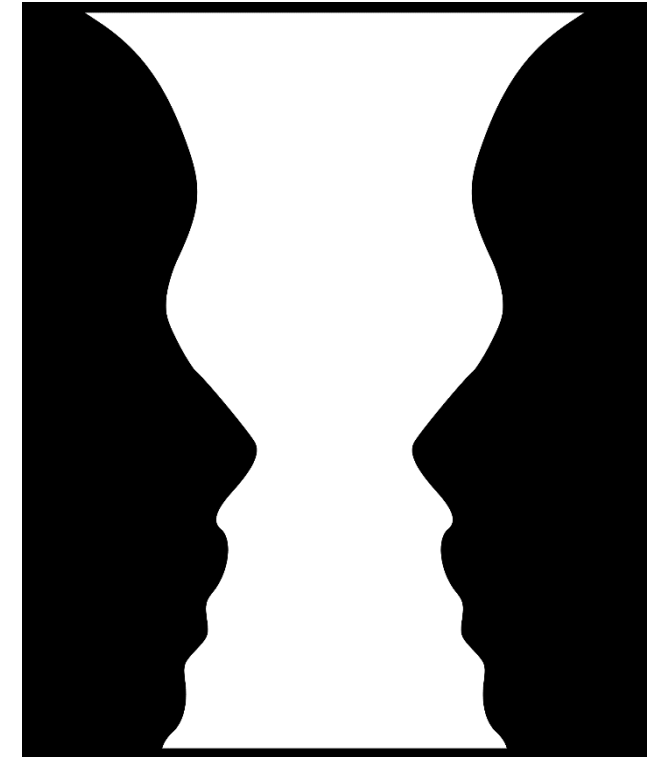
Do you feel compelled to laugh when others are laughing?
Do you feel you need to do things for appearance or to fit in?

[Prison walls to protect others](#)

> Search for three characteristics that you want to guard your loved ones from. Think of the qualities you despise in others the most. They provide subtle signs that your prison walls need to be strengthened to protect others from your invasion.

Do you expect everyone to agree with you?
Do you thrive on having the last word?

Simple. Isn't it? It is deceptively simple, but if done with deep focus, it will force you to reflect on your actions every now and then, uncovering your castle and your prison.



I had accepted a new job in Toronto, the big TO, in 2006, and despite the excitement, leaving Florenceville, New Brunswick was unusually harder than we expected. This was not the first time we were uprooting ourselves in search of the proverbial new pastures. We had travelled thousands of miles before, but this time it seemed different.

With our new Garmin GPS on the car dashboard, joined by my wife Lubna, and our daughter Afraa, we started our road trip from the good old 'French Fry capital of the world' to the towering Toronto. Having gotten lost several times before using the traditional map booklet, I felt a GPS was a wise investment.

It was a 1300 km, 13-hour drive, and fearing we could get stalled in the middle of nowhere, I stopped for refuelling everytime the fuel tank climbed down a quarter.

Driving from a 900 lovely people, no traffic lights and just one public phone both village, my first adjustment was to quickly prepare for the oncoming speedy busy lanes with roaring wheels left and right to our car.

In spite of the repeated, firm, but gentle and perfectly wise voice navigation guidance, to my sheer embarrassment, I steered onto wrong lanes and missed exits or took the wrong ones several times. Most were in the first few hours of the trip.

Thanks to the GPS, the trained voice never ridiculed me or judged me for my mistakes, but objectively like a mentor, kept correcting my errors and placed me back on the right route.



I repeatedly heard her saying "Take the next exit." Now, if you are wondering what does my long and tedious trip details have anything to do with our [Back to Basics](#) journey, then please stay with me a bit longer and I promise it will be worthwhile.

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First, It's always hard to start something new.

Starting anything new outside your familiar space may seem hard. And it is normal. Preparation will be your best friend. However, despite your preparation, the distractions and doubts will slow you down. And when it does, don't look back and second-guess yourselves. Keep going toward your worthy destination.

Second, you will miss some exists.

We all miss the right exits once in a while. And like the wise GPS, we all hope to find someone who can help us stay the course. Perhaps your partner, your family or a close friend, or a colleague. If you can't find someone or don't know who to go to, then try clinging on to some words of hope from the numerous inspiring books. You will get the guidance to get back on track.

Third, be the Garmin voice for others.

If you don't happen to be behind the wheel like me, but do know of someone who is looking for direction, please do not judge them for having missed the exits. Lend them a helping hand. Sometimes a few words of hope is all is needed to put someone back on track.

As we are in this [journey](#) for shaping our foundation, the above may be useful to you whether you are behind the wheel or the wise Garmin voice.

If you got something out of it, please share and drop me a few words to make it better.

PS: It took us 15hr and 20 min to reach Toronto. But we did.

One evening an old Cherokee told his grandson about a battle that goes on inside us all. He said, “My son, the battle is between two wolves inside us all. One is Evil. It is anger, envy, jealousy, sorrow, regret, greed, arrogance, self-pity, guilt, resentment, inferiority, lies, false pride, superiority, and ego. The other is Good. It is joy, peace, love, hope, serenity, humility, kindness, benevolence, empathy, generosity, truth, compassion, and faith.” The grandson thought about it for a minute and then asked: “Which wolf wins?”

The old Cherokee simply replied, “The one you feed.”

Fortunate are those who have had the wisdom to form themselves in the way that they wanted, as most of us are designed through default values selected by others. Starting a new journey, whether to restore or redefine ourselves, is like moulding clay, dark, dense and unclear of the outcome at the onset. However, through guided impressions, the clay begins to take shape; the path begins to become clear.

Fortunately, unlike clay which once dry cannot be reshaped without being broken down, our journey for forming ourselves can be retracted even if we miss an exit, and can restart from that very point.

Thank you for staying with me this far.

Let’s do a quick recap of our discussion so far:

Castle Characters

We identified 3 characteristics that would reflect our personality that is essentially our Brand, which I refer to as our Castle Characters. These are our ‘Precious’ that warrants protection from outside invasion. The most powerful way is to strengthen our walls through constant reminders to ourselves. Being aware of them, and of the consequences of our actions aligned with the brand will keep our castle strong.

Prison Characters

Then, we explored 3 characteristics that we want to protect ourselves and our loved ones from, which I refer to as our Prison Characters. These traits may be dominant or of variant shades. Regardless, you need to cage them behind the protective walls of awareness. The most powerful ways to keep them in check is not to focus on them at all, but to focus on our Castle Characters. Let our Prison characters go hungry of our attention, depriving them of any strength to escape the prison walls. Ultimately our Castle characters will triumph and will become the dominant You.

Takeaway

1. It's hard to start a new journey but start nevertheless. We owe it ourselves and our loved ones.
2. Do not delve on self-doubt and uncertainty. They can be deceptively very convincing, but remind yourselves that you are not an outcome of someone else's opinion of you.
3. Be aware of your Castle characters, and be mindful of your Prison ones.
4. Nurture your Castle characters, and starve your Prison characters
5. If you feel you have lost your way, find someone who can be a source of guidance
6. If you are one of those fortunate ones well on your successful journey, then lend some words of hope to others. Be the Garmin voice.
7. Go back to 1. Remember, it's a journey, not a destination.

Humble note

Who am I to share these words of wisdom? I am certainly not qualified enough. However, I do feel obligated to bring it to my kids the lessons from my mistakes to have them chart their journey without missing too many exits.

If you know of anyone who would benefit from this, then please share. And also let me know how we can together make it better. Because we are stronger together.



CHAPTER TWO

June of 1970 was one of the worst months for my father's business in Mumbai, India. The market was turning very fast. My father had a strong reputation in the industry, and as a result, although far from being an ideal situation, it was still a blessing to have a small but crawling flow of work to keep the ship from sinking.

My father believed the looming political uncertainty led people to tighten-up. Cash flow started drying up, credit became expensive, and with customers having the same challenge, our payments stopped coming. Paying salaries to the 20-25 staff members became a stressful event for our family.

Most of his peers were forced to take the quickest route to keep themselves afloat. Layoff. I can only imagine what my father was thinking about his options. On the one hand, he had to sustain a family of 8 members and keep up his business, and on the other look after the welfare of his staff.

I wasn't born yet, but I was told by his staff how my father handled this challenge. Instead of cutting down, he made a pact with his staff to pay them half of their salaries for six months to a year. And if the business bounced back, he guaranteed to bring up their salaries, and would also pay them the difference if possible. I am sure it must have been equally hard for the employees to give up half of their paycheck, but I can understand that it was better than the options other businesses were taking. The agreement was made, and the business kept going.

"Be yourself.
Everyone else is already
taken."

Oscar Wilde



Months later, the political situation began to normalize, the market started picking up, cash flow was improving, payments began coming, and before the end of that year, the business was back to where it was.

Everything was now the same except for one thing. Through the decision, my father now had built a powerful **brand** for himself. His fan (staff) following remained loyal for a very long time, which helped the business even more. My father was not educated but had the wisdom to make the best decision that makes him a brand.

The previous chapter concentrated on the basics of character formation, the foundation to build on. In this chapter, we will chisel the foundation further to sculpt our Brand.

What comes to mind when you hear the name, Disney? Is it family fun, quality family entertainment, Mickey Mouse, entertainment? Now, how about Abe Lincoln? Integrity, courage, freedom, strength? Hitler or Trump anyone?

Now let's try some that are closer to you.

What comes to mind when you think of your father, mother, your best friend, your spouse, your work boss? How about yourself? Does that portray you for what you are? Does it emanate you? The unique you that has no parallel. If it's dormant inside you, then you need to stir it up a bit and make it speak for you.

Why do we need to build our brand?

Granted not all of us desire to endorse a product or be a brand ambassador. I don't believe we require doing it for name, fame or money. They may be the outcome, but not the means. I think we all owe it ourselves and to others what we have to offer. Perhaps to be remembered when you are gone. Maybe you may need just your name on your obituary to say everything about you.

The whole idea behind your Brand building is to be able to sum one up in a few words. This chapter will try to bring out our core selves that make up our brand.

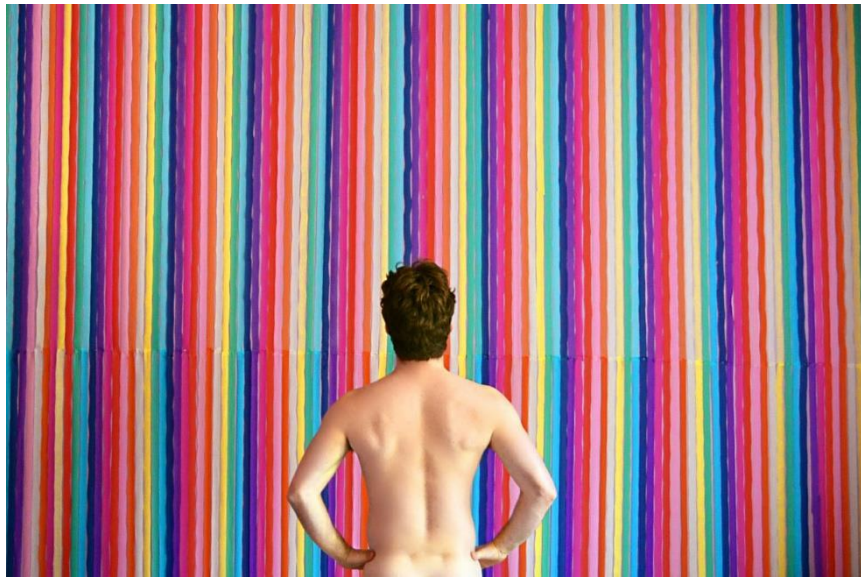
If you do not create your brand, then someone else will.

If you have been with me since the beginning of our [journey](#), then please accept my sincere gratitude. And for those who happen to be new, thank you for joining us. To make the most of this collective wisdom, please refer to the [Read it like a Book](#). If you are in a rush, then here's a quick [summary](#) from chapter one.

Thank you for staying on.

The Emperor's New Clothes, a classic adaption from a 13th-century Indian fable was immortalized by Hans Christian Andersen first published in the early 19th century. The story is about an emperor who cares more about his appearance and posturing, hires two weavers, who to satisfy his vanity promise to make him the most elegant clothes worthy of an emperor that can only be seen by worthy men.

When the emperor parades before his subjects in his new "clothes," everyone applauds pretending to admire the excellent work of art and also proving themselves worthy of their positions. The emperor finally realizes that he was naked all the time when a child from the crowd cries out exposing the mockery.



Just like this vain emperor, we all have several blind spots within us that are invisible to our minds, and we spend all our lives wearing similar invisible "clothes." For some it's vanity or pride, for others, it's arrogance and superiority. And other countless types. Blind spots can be obvious to everyone but ourselves. At the same time, we may have some blind spots that are not even visible to others and ourselves. You may "see" them through the results of your lives.

Blind spots can be self-ignorance or plain denial. It's not surprising that most of us attribute fate or luck or others responsible for our current state. It's sad that we are never taught to be aware of our blind spots during our formative years, let alone remedy them. The good news is that we don't have to live a sub-optimal life forever. No matter at what phase of your life we are in, we are allowed to make the most of what we were handed with. Remember every kid gets the same crayons, it's what they do defines what they become. It's liberating to become aware of our blind spots, as it opens up new possibilities in our lives. We get to renew the relationship with ourselves and others, become more effective using our gifted or trained abilities, and life becomes more purposeful as you get used to living to it's fullest.

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My personal experience as I started working on my blind spots, is that I have become more respectful of others and myself. I am extra self-aware of my thoughts, feelings communication and actions. I have become emotionally stronger, and am driven to improve myself, and possibly share my learning with my kids. I have started my journey, and I have a long way to go. I think I will have to keep going, as the journey for self-improvement can never find a destination. The end of life is the destination. I will have the satisfaction of having realized by shortcomings and tried to overcome them. Will I be entirely successful? Only time will tell.

Let's first explore a bit more about the blind spots. I have come to realize that there are two types of blind spots.

Behavioral Blind Spots: Blind spots visible to others but not yourselves. For instance, you may habitually speak over other people without your knowledge, without your awareness. If you are doing it consciously, then that is plain rude.

Mental Blind Spots: Blind spots invisible to others and yourselves. For instance, if you or someone you know have had unsuccessful marriages, then it's a tell-tale sign that there are some blind spots to be explored.

Either we can remove the blinders and live to our potential or risk parading naked with our invisible clothes on. Knowing you are wise, I invite you to explore your limitation and give yourselves and others the gift you and others rightfully deserves.

In the following blogs, we will cover each in some details. Stay tuned. For now, I would like you to give it some thoughts.