

BURSTING THE BIG DATA BUBBLE

**The Case for Intuition-Based
Decision Making**

VI

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APPENDIX NAMED FILIPE

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I don't know when it actually started. Really. The first time I remember, it was a week or two after I finished first grade. There was this weird tingling feeling on the right side of my abdomen: two inches straight from my belly button, then two inches south, to be precise. It wasn't painful or tender, just kind of tensely awkward. You know, something like if you look down from a twentieth floor balcony and your tummy gets queasy, your thighs become rubbery, and your calves are tense. This time it was just my tummy, not the calves or thighs. And again, it wasn't painful I assured our family doctor who my Mum took me to see and who was ready to operate. He was concerned that my funny feeling was nothing else but an inflamed appendix.

When I asked Doctor Craxton what an appendix is and what it's good for, he wasn't sure. "It has absolutely no purpose," he said. How could it be, I wondered, thinking that God didn't create anything without a purpose, but the doctor just shrugged his shoulders. "That's the way it is with appendix." Then, complying with my request, he drew it on a piece of paper. It looked like a curled worm.

This time, my Mum saved me. "Let's put an icepack on it," she suggested to the doctor, "Then we'll see." So we did. And it stopped. Because in my family everything had a name, our radio, gramophone, even trees, not just our two dogs and two cars, I remembered what my bohemian granny once told me, and named my appendix Filipe. You see, ever since I was a small child, I was told I had some wit about me. Nana, who was full of wisdom and mysterious proverbs, assured me in her heavily accented English that I have "Filipe." She didn't know who he was or where he resided. But I did. He was my

invisible friend who, grandma said, was very smart and, as I always knew, lived in my belly.

Then on Friday, 10 days after Ms. Golding, my math teacher said there's going to be a test next week, Filipe started tingling again. Math was not my favorite subject and Ms. Golding not my favorite teacher. And she knew it. I sat at our kitchen table quite dazed but unperturbed, for I already knew what I was going to do. I took an icepack from the fridge, told Mum I was going to study for my Wednesday test, and went upstairs to my room to talk to Filipe. I felt high.

"What's going on, Filipe? Why such fuss again? That's the math test, isn't it?" and I started leafing through the textbook. Slowly. When I came to page 157, I could feel a little choke. You know, something like when a nurse takes your blood pressure. The mercury goes up and, on the way down when it reaches your maximum or systolic pressure point, makes this warbling sound; then it repeats its funny giggle at your diastolic low. My math diastolic low was at page 221. Three full chapters of math.

I sat there like I was nailed down. The entire weekend. On Wednesday I aced the test. It never happened before. Me, a solid C+, got a full 100. Ms. Golding usually glorified anyone who ever got an A+, but not me. She just wondered aloud, quite maliciously, whether someone told me what will be on the test. So I answered quite truthfully: Filipe. Then she complained to my Mum at the PTA meeting that I was quite impertinent, even though my math somehow improved beyond her understanding. Mum didn't ask me who Filipe was, concluding that he must be one of the boys I knew.

Once, after listening on one of the late TV shows to a highly accredited medical doctor with impeccable credentials from Yale and psychiatry residence at Mass General who explained intuition as the link into our subconscious mind, I came to an irreversible conclusion that my vermiform friend is nothing else but an antenna for receiving messages. That Filipe could be actually somewhere else and my appendix is like one of those hi-tech, snowflake-shaped antennas on modern laptops, helping me get in touch with him. I never said anything about Filipe to anybody. I treated the existence of my special friend as a secret, like all those people who have seen a UFO but refused to be ridiculed by the official government policy.

When I was 18 and about to graduate, my neighbor and friend, Johnny Walker, a first-year med student, invited me to go climbing with him in the Rockies. I liked Johnny because he was a nerd. He was into science, regular or weird, and I was sure if I could talk to someone about my predicament, it would be him. I just had to get him out of his regular zone. The Rockies would do fine. I planned my soul-opening spiel for the last day of our climb.

We slept in some kind of a hut, nothing much, no beds, just wooden planks one above the other, but our sponge mats made the hardness of the wood bearable. It would have been a gorgeous morning if I didn't feel Filipe. This time he wasn't just tingling with some kind of regular anxiety, he was positively rattling. You know, something like high-voltage wires behind the farmhouse of my Aunt Eli, in Liberty, New York. Oh my! This was unusual. I just couldn't ignore it but, for an unknown reason, I wasn't quite forthcoming in telling Johnny what it was about. Don't ask me why. It is an irritated appendix, that's for sure, he said. We have to go back. You don't want it ruptured over there, and he pointed way to the rocky top covered in snow. That's what I wanted to tell him anyway, that we should turn back, but I knew when a man takes an idea as his own, it's much better. And so we went.

The weather changed in the midpoint of our descent. Dark, ominous clouds roughed up by powerful wind rolled in from nowhere. When we came back to our hotel, we could see it was a vicious snowstorm up there. Then, the next day we heard that the winds had triggered an avalanche that swept a few people in its deadly path. Of course, my appendix miraculously healed. That evening, Johnny Walker, sipping his favorite brand of scotch, joined a heated debate about the inclement weather that stopped us from achieving our planned goal. Pointing at me, he pronounced loudly in the bar for everybody to hear that "It looks like her goddamn appendix saved our goddamn asses." And on that auspicious day, as a mission from God, I decided to take intuition seriously.

* * *

I do not much like third-world countries. Not just because I am a perfectionist and they are every perfectionist's nightmare, but it eludes me why all those rich folks from Australia, Europe, and North America go to India to seek so-called enlightenment in some kind

of ashram, when the owner, the "very famous guru" sits in her palatial residence in California. I guess because after they scrub floors and holler their chants for two weeks, they write a bestseller on how they got their stripes of enlightenment, whatever that is, and become rich. That's why.

To fly for a week to Bali was my husband's idea of a romantic birthday gift. Since he stopped flying gliders, I reasoned, he needed an occasional slight fix of a third-world danger. So Carl said we were going to Bali, and that it's his shout. That I need a break. But I knew better. He gave it to me knowing very well that I'd prefer to take the bullet train between Osaka and Tokyo or the TGV from Paris. That's the way my husband is. He gives presents he'd like to get. As a teenager, I was told by my mother-in-law, he once gave her an LP of the Stones for Christmas. When the imperturbable Mary, who accepted graciously Mick Jagger's much repeated complaint that he can't get no satisfaction, gave Carl curtains for the living room for his birthday, he was about as satisfied as Mick in his signature song.

The Indonesian island of Bali is an Australian playground. It is because it's "close by," just around the corner, a mere eight-hour flight. And also because it's exotic, beer is decent, and the lore says you can buy drugs there cheaply. I wouldn't know. I wondered why Carl, who was so affected by the bombing carnage at Kuta 10 years ago, wanted to go there. He isn't into drugs or beer, and short-legged brunettes aren't his type. At least, I insisted, we are not staying anywhere near Kuta. Too many drunks. So he booked us into a villa nestled in the rice fields, 10 miles away from Ubud.

A couple of days after our arrival, I assessed the entire Bali scene as a large exotic village full of poor people who, wherever you walk, are trying to sell you something. Someone told me that the government offered a scooter to any young male willing to undergo a vasectomy. It could be a rumor. Nevertheless, millions of two-stroke, testosterone-driven scooters are buzzing around Bali. This makes you wonder whether the rumor is true. You can't drive there. It is too dangerous. You need to hire a local driver because of the heavy flow of scooters. One more thing, it is hard to walk on the sidewalks in Ubud. Too many holes trying to entrap your shaky ankles. You are better off walking on the road.

For four fun-filled days we ate, prayed, and loved all those gold-painted temples and rice paddies. We lay down on the rim of the volcano where supposedly, while still available, virgins were thrown in to assure a plentiful harvest. When our most competent driver named Wayan Apple learned about my family furniture business, he took us to a factory where they make amazing furniture out of bamboo.

Today was the day of relaxation. I decided to enjoy our open-space villa. It was my time to meditate. But the only thing that came to my mind and I couldn't get rid of, was one of my PhD students, Dani Kandi, a "self-acknowledged psychic." When I told her about our trip, she came to me the next day with "mortal danger" written all over her little face. Now, as I was meditating on world peace, I could hear her voice again: "There will be danger. Maybe scorpions, spiders, snakes, or malaria-bearing mosquitoes." Well, "We've been here for four days and haven't seen one of those. So, shut up, Dani." I tried to silence her harangue as if she were a campaigning politician. But Dani was right. Only that mortal danger came from a completely different angle. Thank God, Filipe was vigilant.

It was a very slow morning as we slept in. Carl was in and out of the shower, as usual, and I went right after him. I liked the bathroom. It had large marble tiles on the floor, a few mirrors around, a bidet next to the commode, and, peculiarly, an open-air shower where you could see the stars. Although the tub was still inside the bathroom, the high-powered shower was mounted on the volcanic peripheral wall, outside. The ceiling was missing. Moving around as fast as a feeding koala, I watched the passing clouds above my head and enjoyed the high-pressured stream of rainwater, heated by the morning sun. Then, as I stepped out, I announced to my waiting husband that because the restaurant closed for breakfast at 10 already, it would be better if he went first and ordered for both of us. I would need another 15 minutes to dry my hair. He looked at me funny and smiled. My 15 minutes would be at least half an hour, he knew. As he left and I reached for the hairdryer, I could feel Filipe buzzing me. I stopped cold, noticing that the beautifully polished marble floor was quite slippery. "Is that the problem?" I asked Filipe, walking into the bedroom with the hairdryer in my hand. Standing there, I looked for a plug. Just before I plugged it in, about to sit down

in front of the bedroom mirror, Filipe's annoying buzz turned to an angry rattle. I couldn't fathom why. But I should have known better.

When the hit came, I thought it was a terrorist bomb. After all, this is Bali. The shock of pain hit me at the same time as blackness. It went through my arm, shoulder, head, and buckled my knees. I don't remember much except for the acute pain zipping through my body. When I finally opened my eyes, I felt quite paralyzed. Lying on my left side, neck twisted, my eyes trying to focus on the texture of the carpet. I couldn't move and had a hard time breathing. The darkness slowly dissipated and so did the horrible pain. My right arm was out of commission. I tried to figure out what had just happened, or maybe not just. I had no idea how long I was laying there. Using my left arm, I tried to move my knees under my body and lift myself up. It was a useless struggle. My paralysis wouldn't go away. I stayed curled in a fetal position, happy to breathe, thinking: "What is going on?"

When I finally regained mobility and my senses, the smell gave away the culprit. No bomb and no terrorists. It was a faulty hairdryer. A tiny little bit of wire with missing insulation touched my perspiring wrist and the current of 240 volts, otherwise confined to a copper wire, did exactly what it is supposed to do: it ran wherever there was an auspicious opening. A little peephole and right into my wrist. Nothing personal, girl, just business. I checked the clock. I must have been out of commission for 10 minutes. Then the anger set in. How dare! And with wobbly knees and shaky legs, I proceeded to find the GM of the resort. By the time I found him, I was livid. As I waved the faulty hairdryer at his face, full of passion to get my justice like a Goddess of Vendetta herself, he looked genuinely scared. Then I slammed the door of his office and went to look for my husband. The show was not over yet.

Carl was already out of the restaurant, on the concrete path, in search and rescue mode. I was an hour late, at least 30 minutes later than usual. When he saw me looking wrought, pale, yielding the hairdryer like a lethal weapon, he knew that something horrible must have happened. After I told him about Filipe buzzing me to get out of the bathroom and me thinking I could slip on the wet floor and injure myself, I pointed to the hairdryer which I smartly kept in my possession as *corpus delicti*. His response was as swift

and fearsome as I hoped for. With red sparks flying out of his aura, he dragged me back to the manager's office, and if I was bad, he was awful. He gave him hell about lack of due diligence, usually punishable by court. In his eyes was mortal fear and in his harangue was molten lead. This was not just any simple accident involving scratched insulation on a 240-V wire, but quite a successful attempt to kill his beloved wife and put him in the Kerobokan jail.

There I stood, quite pleased with his fierce defense of myself but rather disturbed by his argument. Why the hell would *he* be thrown into jail, in that awful abode where a prisoner is responsible for his own food, toothpaste, soap, and all the rest of provisions civilized people use, that much I knew. As we walked out, I could see he was beyond pissed. He was in primordial fear, shaking fiercely. "Did he love me really that much?" I asked.

"You dummy, this is Bali," he spat out. "You are guilty unless proven innocent, but the onus is on you! Capish? If you can't prove yourself innocent, you are guilty. Remember Chapelle Corby?"

"Of course I do," I said indignantly. "Who doesn't?"

"Well, what happened to her?"

"She was bringing a bag of grass to Bali in her boogie-board and the Customs found it."

He hissed, "Exactly!" Then with an unctuous disposition, slowly and patiently as he would talk to a retarded child, he explained: "They never proved it but she couldn't prove her innocence either. There were no fingerprints on that four-kilo bag of vacuumed grass. Thank God you listened to Filipe and stepped out of that puddle I left behind. He and the bedroom carpet saved my arse! Good boy, Fil," he said and patted me on the right side of my belly.

I stood there flabbergasted. "Saved *you*?"

"Sure! If you stayed in the puddle, you'd be dead now like Brendan Nelson's wife."

"What about her?"

"She took her hairdryer while showering. The good doctor got away unscathed because he wasn't at home, and his home was Brisbane, not Bali."

"And?"

"If I went up to the villa after eating my and your breakfast and found you an hour dead, lying on the floor with a smelly hairdryer,"

he said with the utmost disdain, "those local police morons, because of your life insurance and me being your beneficiary, would find me guilty that very hour."

"Why would they?"

"Like Chapelle, her fingerprints weren't on that bag and the police didn't even bother to look for them. So, the unfortunate girl got 20 years on the basis of circumstantial evidence. The term 'without reasonable doubt' that we in the West value so much, local justice doesn't care for."

Now it became clear. It wasn't me my husband was so fiercely defending.

"Is this why you were—I could see—so scared? Is it what triggered it?" There was a long and awkward pause. I could feel my husband coming out clean.

"There've been many predictions my mother made and, as far as I can remember, all came true," he said hesitantly. I could see that he was struggling but I also knew that he was right. Mary was a regular Cassandra of NYC. "Once, while swimming at Rockaway Beach in New York City, a wave flipped me over like a burger and slammed me onto hard sand. There was no more than two feet of water but I had no idea what was up and what was down. I almost drowned. When I came home, I told my mother. Without a drop of kindness or pity, she proclaimed coolly: 'You should have known better and trust your mother, dearest. Remember what I always told you?' I couldn't believe what I was hearing.

"That for me is—the gallows? That I die being hung by rope till dead? That was one of your sick jokes, Mum!" I said, walking out of the kitchen, not really anxious to hear her acerbic rebuttal that she was so good at.

"That's why I was so scared, darling. Your unusual appendix saved me. But getting life and being locked up in that hell-hole," he sighed, "without you—that'd be the worst." Then he touched my tummy again and said with complete sincerity: "Thank you, Filipe."

I was flabbergasted. "Do you think anyone will believe it?" I asked my grateful husband after a protracted silence.

"Believe what? That you almost got electrocuted by a hairdryer?"

"No. That my appendix is an antenna to some 'other' world?"

Carl looked me with cool detachment. Then he assured me in his peculiar, unique way: "Remember Dan Quayle?"

"The VP of Bush Sr.?"

"Yes, that's the one. He once said: 'The ridges on Mars mean that once upon a time, there was water.'" My husband, former engineer on the space station project, looked at me quizzically. "Do you know what happened after that?"

"Yes. The entire world laughed how stupid he was."

"Even NASA. But," Carl paused, "they aren't laughing any more. It's time, darling, that you tell the world what the appendix is really good for."

* * *

And that's how it all started. I figured out, because the appendix has no known physical function, its only possible function is ethereal. This was my hypothesis which I set about to test. My problem, of course, was not only to get ethical clearance but how to recruit willing participants. So I decided to study myself. I based my methodology on Gail Ferguson who, as a sole subject, sorted out her own intuitions into neat categories and wrote a whole book about it. I could not quite foresee any Nobel Prize coming my way, even if my rigorous research would prove true. And rigorous it was. In my diary, I recorded meticulously any minute reaction in my belly, then noted whatever happened to me. I kept score of Filipe's hits and misses, looking for a significant variable. I felt like a UFO observer who is unwilling to go public. So for the time being, I decided my personal data collection has to stay in the closet. Let a medical doctor get my glory one day.

In the meantime, weird studies started popping up, giving credence to my original idea. A researcher in Sydney monitored her patients' brain waves, only to find out that intuition-related parts of the brain were active when the patient got emotionally in sync with the therapist. So, I reasoned, this connection could make the transfer of feelings and even thoughts between two people possible. Quantum physics has been hinting at the existence of "nonlocal intuition" for quite some time. Then a PhD dissertation from Melbourne came across my desk, suggesting that we register our intuitions not only through emotions, as the Damasio-led team has been implying for years, but also through our senses. Here we go, the same thing I suggested in our intuition training book. So why wouldn't it be possible to use for the same purpose, and maybe more, our appendix? Rest assured, my little project is going on.

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