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The Ten Thousand Things: A story of the lived experience of the I Ching

By Glenn Martin

Overview: A man comes to a leadership position in an organisation and in the first week has to deal with an embezzlement that has left the organisation with no money. He stays, and manages to build the organisation into a dynamic provider of services to the local community. But then he finds himself under attack from unethical and manipulative individuals who have an agenda to destroy what he has built up. The book highlights the ethical dimensions of the leadership role.

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EXTRACT

Chapter 15: The bold, the inferior

The president's role was honorary. His day job was as manager of the local branch of a bank. Brian was only young – mid-twenties – and he also had an executive role in one of the service clubs, as well as being a councillor on the local council. He was big in person too, and charming, confident and authoritative. I could imagine his framed photo in the council chambers in twenty years' time, mayor of the town, with the ceremonial robes draped around him, as large as his predecessors.

Brian told me the history of the organisation, told me about the services they ran, for adults and children with disabilities, told me about the fundraising activities and how successful that had been in the last year. He told me to take my time getting to know the scope of the job, meet the staff, read the documents.

He gave me a stack of documents to take away. One of the services was in an old church hall. The service was a daytime activity centre for adults with intellectual disabilities. My office was a room at the side. It contained very little. An old desk and chair, a small filing cabinet and the promise of a phone soon. I was the first paid manager of the organisation. They had convinced the federal government that it should provide funding for a manager. I went home and read my way through the documents and tried to map out what this organisation did, what made it tick and who the key players were.

I had another meeting with Brian a couple of days later. I had digested what he had given me, I had met all the staff, and visited the other two service sites. One was a children's residence, the other was a respite care service based in the neighbourhood centre. What I

needed to know now was about the finances of the organisation. I had not received anything from the president about that.

So I said just that: I've been through the information you gave me, and the next thing I need to get a grasp of is the finances. But he replied there was no rush for that, everything was in hand for the time being, and my next step should be to work out what equipment I needed for my office. I could do that over the next few days and come back to him with that.

There was something else about the hexagram Ta Yu that floated back into consciousness at this point. There had been moving lines, and the hexagram transformed to Kou (44): "Coming to meet". The I Ching contains an abundance of images, and sometimes their relevance to the situation is not immediately apparent. Kou contains the image of the principle of darkness, after having been eliminated, entering again from below. "It is an unfavourable and dangerous situation, and we must understand and promptly prevent the possible consequences."

It is the rise of an inferior element. It happens because the strong did not regard it as dangerous and allowed it to have power. The inferior thing seemed harmless and inviting and people delighted in it, they imagined that they could dally with it and come to no harm.

I still didn't know what to make of this allusion, but I was now extremely uncomfortable. Brian, the president, had ended our meeting, having fobbed me off with trivialities. When I thought back to our first meeting, it now seemed consistent with the same intent – to be charming and friendly without broaching the essential matter of finances.

I went home with serious disquiet. This was untenable. I was thinking, I am going to have to sort this out, and quickly. I am the manager, I need to have control of the finances. And if the president isn't forthcoming with the books at our next meeting, I am going to have to approach the other people on the committee.

I didn't have to do anything. I got a phone call late that night. It was one of the people on the committee. He told me that Brian had been arrested earlier that evening. The charge was embezzlement. The Fraud Squad had been investigating him for four weeks, ever since the books had gone to the accountants for the annual audit and they discovered that all of the investment funds were missing.

President of one of the town's favourite charities. Twenty-five years old. Local councillor, the youngest ever to be elected in this town. And regional president for a respected service club. Here was one of the town's darlings, a man going places. The truth was a bit uglier. He'd embezzled all of the charity's funds.

In fact, he'd gone one better. He'd convinced the management committee that it was a good idea to create an overdraft and operate on that, in order to increase the amount of funds on investment. So when he embezzled the money, he actually took a lot more than the organisation had. They were left with the overdraft.

This had been going on for eighteen months. The auditors had been remiss in not discovering it the previous year. Brian had faked statements for the investment account, possible because he was the bank manager, and the investments were made at his bank. Once Brian got through one audit, he "went

for broke” as they say. He was taking out \$1,000 to \$3,000 every couple of weeks.

It made sense of a lot of behaviour that townspeople reported over the next few weeks. How there had been a regional meeting of the service club and he had ordered pizzas and drinks for everybody. No problem. I’ll pay. And my favourite: hiring a plane to fly two hundred kilometres to go to a ceremony where he would collect a cheque for the charity, the result of a huge fund-raising event run by the local television station.

What fascinated me was how he had maintained the façade right up until the end, acting as if the whole future was his. He had talked to me about what great things he and I could achieve with the organisation. He had plans for expanded services, new services, a growing empire of services that would serve the whole district. He was effusive. The term “presidential” seemed fitting.

It became obvious during the trial that Brian’s charm had been widely effective. He even had prominent businessmen from the local community give character references for him in court. He’d done such great things for the community. The significance of the fraud had not yet sunk in. I was the one who reaped the bitter crop later, when it occurred to people that they were not prepared to give us any more money when we’d allowed a crook to steal everything they had raised for us last time.

But aside from the embarrassingly stupid character referees, there were others who could recount clues. Some of them had felt uncomfortable at the time about this man shouting everyone food and drinks. They thought he was trying too hard to win friends and support. And they wondered how the

bank manager of a small branch could afford to be so generous. Some of them squirmed at the idea of the president chartering a plane to accept a donation to a charity, even if he was “paying for it himself”.

Then there was the speculation about who else might have been in on it. What about the secretary, who said she trustingly signed blank cheques? What about his friend, who had recently left town and was buying a pub in some town out west?

The more reflective of the people I talked to said that Brian would offer to do things, look after things, and he was so confident, and he seemed to work so tirelessly for the public good, that everyone was glad to hand it over, let him do it. The inferior thing seems so harmless and inviting that the people delight in it. If the people had some misgivings about him, and there were revealing stories about him that went back to school days, they were prepared to push those misgivings to one side.

What now? One week into the job, the job that had been marked out for me by the universe, and I had no funds, no accounting books or records, virtually no infrastructure, and the organisation was tarred with the brush of shame. The staff was in shock and demoralised. And I was no one. I had not proved my credibility yet. I was just some young guy from up in the hills, with a beard and hair that was slightly too long (although the hair was getting shorter in line with the need for wider social acceptability). And the immediate issue was: how would the bills get paid next week?

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