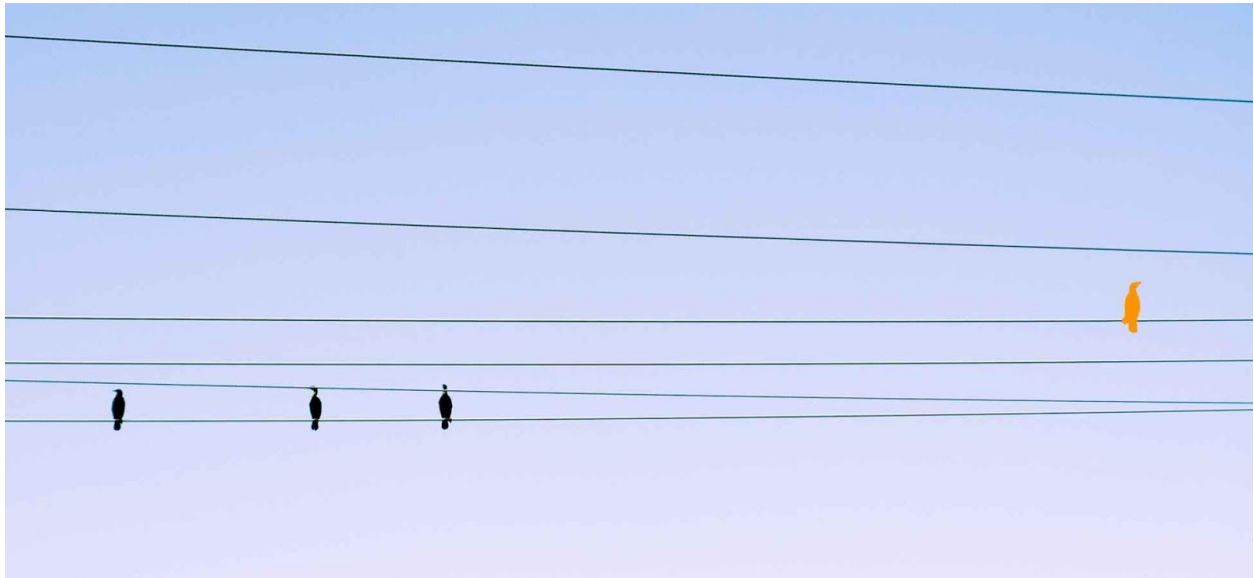


IoNTELLIGENCE Brief | Newsletter 12 | March 2018



Key Points

- **March's theme: Contrarian Thinking**
- **Acceleration Tip: Give up one of your most cherished ideas today**
- **Thinking Tool: Slow Thinking**
- **Read *Sex at Dawn* and *Why We Get Fat*; Listen to this “Intelligence Squared” Podcast with Yuval Harari**
- **Philosophical Espresso Shot: What Mark Twain and Oscar Wilde have in common in standing apart**

If there was a holy trinity of crucial 21st-century skills, I would personally nominate the following: lifelong learning, stillness (of mind as well as of body) and contrarian (or least critical) thinking. The first one is obvious and the second is becoming more so. But the third may surprise you. Its importance stems from a rise in intellectual and behavioural conformity, as well as the fact that our ‘reality’ can now be manipulated (see Augmented Reality, Virtual Reality and of course Facebook, it appears).

Perhaps this is the most critical reason of all, however: what we think of as the ‘truth’ needs to be continuously questioned so that it can be validated, updated or discarded. In the current climate, there is a real value to keeping your mind’s door constantly open to doubt. Uncertainty makes us more receptive to new information and — gasp — to

changing our minds when the facts warrant it. I've written before about how many things in our society are no longer true, even though they once were. I've come to believe that, in the spirit of constructive skepticism, we now need to continuously ask the following three questions:

What is true?

How do we know (it's true)?

Is it still true?

This month's edition is an exploration of that questioning mindset. In that vein, I've collected some of the most contrarian ideas on business, history, sex, health, money and religion. *Let's get started ...*

Acceleration

Relinquish one of your - or your company's - most long-standing ideas

I've been very consistent about the need to be a "[perpendicular thinker](#)" and I'd like to think I've practiced what I preach. I believe it's more important to [manage your exits than your entrances](#). I've argued that [time and attention are more precious resources](#) today than money and power, and I wrote a [book](#) on why learning from mistakes is more valuable than studying successes.

For better or worse, I constantly look at society's sacred ideas and question whether they're still relevant today. All these years, I was unknowingly following the sage advice of one of the wisest men on the planet. Charlie Munger is the Robin to Warren Buffett's Batman - the wisecracking sidekick who is less well-known than he should be but just as much a sage as the Oracle of Omaha. One of his most profound ideas is this:

"Any year that passes in which you don't destroy one of your best loved ideas is a wasted year."

Ask yourself: *what assumption | idea | habit | workflow do you or your organization currently hold or practice that could use a second look?* I call this a relevance review: is the practice still appropriate? Should it be revised, reinvented or replaced? How many aspects of your life are governed by routines whose chief value is "we've always done it that way"?

Conclusion: Chances are that there is at least one instance of received wisdom in your life or organization that would benefit from being mothballed. **Go out and ‘unlearn’ one of your most loved ideas today** and revel in being a rebel.

Pair this with: The most recent [episode](#) of our podcast ‘Boiling the Ocean’ ostensibly asks: ‘How many hockey pucks are there in Canada?’ However, we also dive into a lively discussion of the power of a well-posed question.

Thinking Tool

In Praise of Slow Thinking

As a reaction to fast food (and its more modern incarnation, *fast casual*), a countermovement rose up a number years ago extolling the virtues of ‘[slow food](#)’. Since then, we’ve seen the emergence of [slow fashion](#), [slow cities](#) and perhaps unsurprisingly a [slow life movement](#). The latest installment is perhaps the most powerful intellectual concept of all: *slow thinking*.

The basic idea is this: we are subjected to relentlessly accelerated news cycles and increasingly polarized discourse, especially in the realm of politics. Rather than jumping in and expressing an opinion, it would behoove us to think twice before doing so. Take some time and distance before wading into a controversy or espousing a point of view. As philosopher Ephrat Livni notes, “when we’re not in a rush to reach a conclusion or take action, we’re free to explore ideas and change our minds.” What a novel concept!

You’d be in good company if you adopted this habit of thought. Eastern philosophical traditions share this view. Philosopher Lao Tzu pointed out in the 6th century BC that “one who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know.” Returning to the 21st century, there was a famous article about President Obama describing how he spent his evenings in solitude, reading and thinking about the issues upon which he would have to ultimately form an opinion before taking action. If a president can find time to contemplate before wading into a debate, surely we can as well?

Conclusion: Don’t just do something; sit there. **Think twice. Think slowly.**

Pair this with: Here’s a contrarian idea: rather than associating activity with productivity, the best way to do your best work and be your happiest self is to cultivate

the ability to be still in mind and body. My recent [article](#) 'Stillness is the 21st Century Super Power' describes how to do just that.

Perpendicular Reading Hall of Fame

Here are the 'speed reads' from some of my favorite books extolling contrarian ideas.

[Sex at Dawn](#) | Christopher Ryan

Key Idea: Humans are not meant to be monogamous. It's a relatively recent phenomenon that has largely been promoted by patriarchal societies.

[The Wealthy Renter](#) | Alex Avery

Key Idea: For many of us, renting makes more financial sense than buying.

[Why We Get Fat](#) | Gary Taubes

Key Idea: It's not calories in, calories out - it's actually sugars and carbs that make us fat.

[Mindset](#) | Carol S. Dweck

Key Idea: We can actually change, learn and grow, and having the opposite view — a fixed mindset — can be terrible for our performance and satisfaction with life.

[The Paradox of Choice](#) | Barry Schwartz

Key Idea: More choice is not always better. Limiting our choices will make us happier while allowing us to make better decisions.

[Sapiens](#) | Yuval Noah Harari

Key Idea: There are so many, but the one that blew my mind was that agriculture domesticated us (rather than the other way around).

Pair This With: [A recent appearance by Yuval Noah Harari on the excellent Intelligence Squared podcast](#) in the UK, where he spends sixty glorious minutes skewering every sacred cow in our civilization.

Philosophical Espresso Shot:

"Whenever you find yourself on the side of the majority, it is time to pause and reflect."
(Mark Twain)

"Everything popular is wrong." (Oscar Wilde)