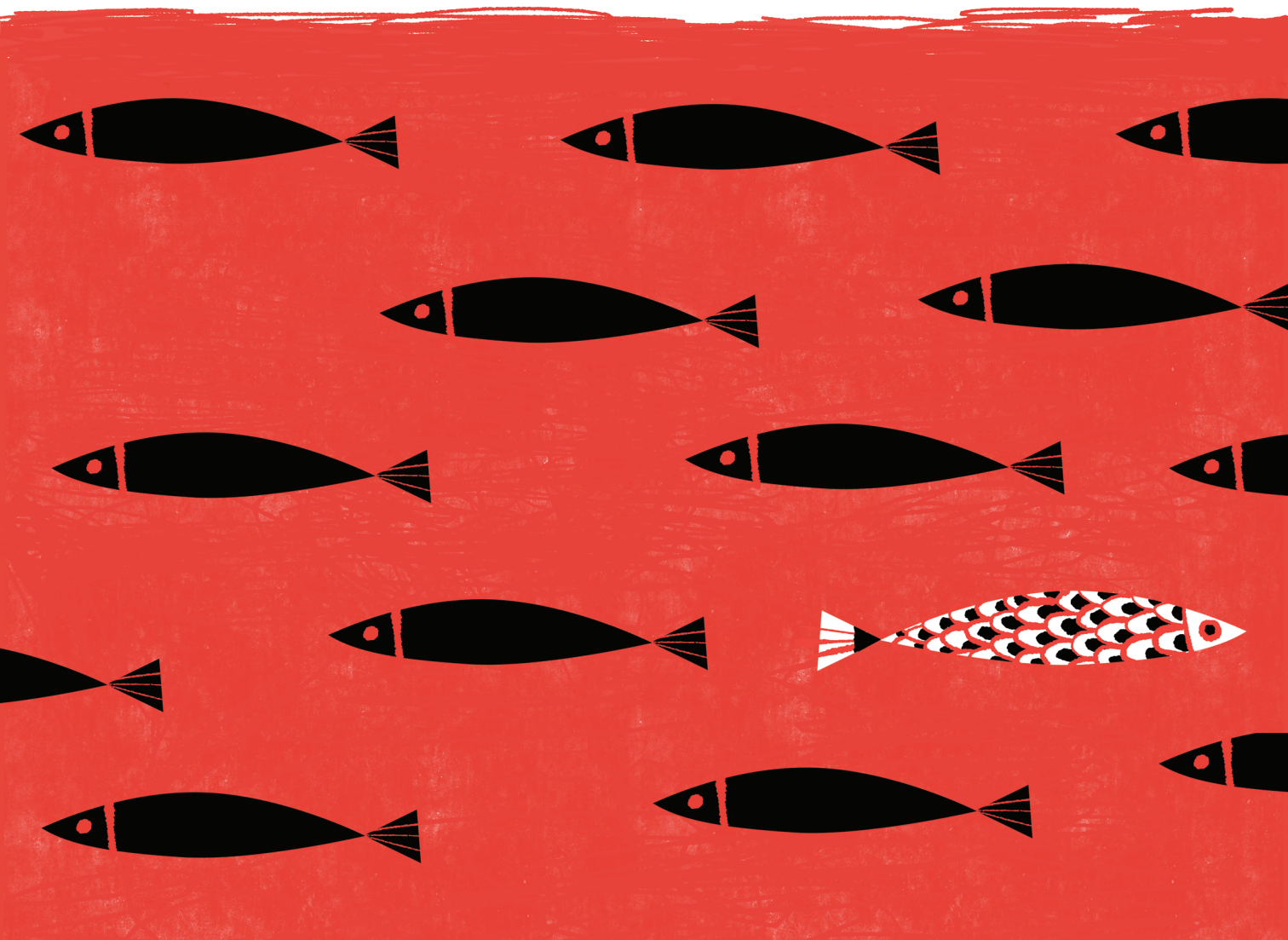


Independent Thinking

Ian Gilbert



What an engaging read, splattered with gems which will make you think and think again about life, living, dying and what education, teaching and schools are, and how, at their best, they might excite and influence. Idiosyncratic it is, with its 'Thunks' and its apparent kaleidoscopic randomness, but all the more worth reading because, or despite of, all that.

Christopher Day, Professor of Education, University of Nottingham

For 20 years Ian Gilbert's company Independent Thinking has encouraged us to think independently. Never has that been more important. His new book is a wonderful celebration of how education should be about more than value-added: it should be 'values-added'. Ian Gilbert exudes strong values and clear principles. His writing is endlessly inventive and refreshing, and his ideas serve as an uplifting antidote to an educational world which can too often feel dispiriting, mechanical and joyless. This is a book to read and keep returning to, to rejuvenate us in the darker days of term-time. Highly recommended.

Geoff Barton, Head Teacher, King Edward VI School, Suffolk

Ian Gilbert has provided us with a wonderful, entertaining smorgasbord of a read. The author offers insights into his personal history and charts the ways in which this has influenced his own intellectual development. In doing so, he continually challenges our assumptions and delivers some perceptive comments on current educational practice. Although the book differs from conventional educational offerings, readers will undoubtedly find themselves forced to rethink their ideas about the best way to prepare today's children for life in tomorrow's world.

Professor Maurice Galton, Faculty of Education, University of Cambridge

I enjoyed the latest book by my namesake – but not relative I should hasten to add!

Independent Thinking is a teacher-friendly book in many ways. First, for busy classroom teachers, like me, it can be dipped in and out of and you'll find treasure on every page: a pearl of wisdom to motivate you; a wonderful 'Thunk' to get you rethinking a subject with a fascinating question; a meditation upon the purpose of education to make you think about why you're teaching; an incisive observation about young people to enable you to see them in a different light; an autobiographical reflection to help you see how we're all connected by our common familial experiences; and points to help you be a better parent or professional.

Second, this book is informed by a philosophy which is both coherent and creative. A unifying theme permeates it, which is possibly encapsulated by one of Gilbert's aphorisms: 'Creativity starts with "If only ..." Mediocrity ends with it.'

Francis Gilbert, author of *I'm A Teacher, Get Me Out Of Here*

In the modern world of education, it has become commonplace for individuals, groups and companies to offer solutions for our every need. Education, through its obsession with data, 'outstanding' lessons and results, has led to the need for silver bullets and quick-fix solutions. This is what makes Ian Gilbert's *Independent Thinking* such a refreshing book to read. Through an eclectic mix of stories, reflections and Thunks, the book fosters the very process which gives it its title. Reading this book will not provide any solutions but will act as fertile jump-off points to new questions and thinking as you engage with the many ideas explored here. There is a wide selection of topics, insights and perspectives but running through them is a strong Freirean philosophy and a belief in the goodness and potential of humanity.

This is a book which can be used in a number of different ways, from a starting point for personal reflection to a focus for collaborative discussion. One element which I find particularly positive is the lack of a simple, linear narrative; the reader can engage with

as little or as much of the content as they wish, and can engage with the ideas in an order that suits them. Deleuze, the French philosopher, argues that we should think with the world rather than about it; this book, for me, embodies this ideal.

Dr Phil Wood, School of Education, University of Leicester

Independent Thinking is scattered with Ian Gilbert's own life experiences, using them to highlight his passion about what education should be. This is a must-read for teachers, parents, students, anyone with an interest in how our children are taught, and most importantly those responsible for designing and influencing the school curriculum!

From the first page to the last page, *Independent Thinking* is not only easy to read, but easy to relate to, easy to agree with almost everything written on every page, easy to say 'Yes, why isn't that happening?' and easy to write a list of all those you would like to read it. It isn't easy to put down and it won't be one of those books Ian describes in one of his bookshelf chapters, with the remark that 'if you have a book but don't read it within three months give it to someone else.'

Number 1 in the list of 42 uses for this book is 'To help you think' and it does just that. Using at times personal examples from throughout his life, he questions why 'thinking' is not integrated into teaching as naturally as it should be, which in turn makes the reader ask the same question. The arguments made for why it should be are hard to argue against.

**Latifa Hassanali, Programme Manager,
'a prestigious international school near London'**

Independent Thinking neutralises feedback by pointing out that it is an expression of the preferences, prejudices and limitations of the reviewer. That being so, I will confess to limitations of time and a preference for dipping in and out. Luckily ‘dipping in and out’ is one of the intended uses of this book.

I can have a lot of fun with a ‘Think – ‘Is never longer than forever?’ or ‘What are the achievements of a newborn baby?’ are satisfying questions to ponder or discuss. I enjoy certainty, too. In my world, the answers to the ‘Thinks ‘Is it more important to do “I love you” than to say “I love you”?’ and ‘Can you be a head teacher if you’ve never been a teacher and can you be a good head teacher if you’ve never been a good teacher?’ are ‘Yes’. It’s not lost on me that my certainty makes me an object of mistrust.

As to prejudices, what is the point of education? I know it isn’t to replicate ‘What works for me ...’ Can the bogeyman that phrase conjures really be defeated by one little boy refusing to write his answers down? That, it seems to me, is the question at the heart of this book. Will it be used to start a revolution? Only if we use it to help us think. I did.

**Rachael Wardell, Corporate Director,
Communities Directorate, West Berkshire Council**

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To Mónica

For bringing me back to life

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Do things no one does or do things everyone does in a way no one does

These Are My Thoughts Get Your Own

I don't believe in systems. In pre-packaged answers to everyday questions. If you think about something long enough to come up with a response and then act on it then you have at least proven you exist, or rather made it worthwhile existing. Your response might be the same as everyone else's, but it is still your response and has more value than the off-the-shelf answers peddled by the people with something to sell and an army of shelf stackers.

I set up Independent Thinking in 1993 as an organisation to encourage young people to use their thoughts to get more out of their lives. I had no idea what it would look like or where it would take me. I still don't, 20 years later. It's a 'for-profit company' but was set up, I now realise, to make a difference, not to make a profit. If the only thing it has done in 20 years is to encourage more people to think for themselves – to reflect, to think, to think deeply, to think independently and then to act in a similar spirit – then it will have been worthwhile.

The journey, like most people's, has been a hard one. Everyone has their heartaches. Their baggage. Their story. While you cannot avoid misfortune it is particularly easy to avoid opportunity. Simply keep your head down being busy. It will soon pass on to someone else. The challenge is to create, spot and then seize the opportunities. Success isn't the goal – it's the process that counts. That way,

every day is a success, no matter how hard it is. You can only do this, though, if you see life as an adventure. When you do it means that, no matter what happens, it is all simply 'part of the adventure'. It is not actually anything at all to do with that so-called 'real life' where you have to be serious and grown up. It's just an adventure. In fact, when nothing is real life, everything is OK.

It doesn't make for an easy life but it does make for an interesting one. You can have one or the other but you can't have both. You have to choose.

2 I was asked to write this book to capture the spirit of what independent thinking – not Independent Thinking – is all about. Which is a hard one. A book of my thoughts to encourage you to have thoughts of your own. The most I can do is to put down in print what I think and how I think in the hope that this will act as a stimulus to your own thinking. Some of the thoughts I have recorded here are short one-liners. Others are longer, but that is usually because I haven't had the time to make them shorter. Either way I hope the effect will be the same – to use my thoughts to stimulate your own.

And what is it I spend most of my time thinking about? Well, for over 20 years it has been about education, not only what goes on in the classroom but education in its wider sense of helping the world think. If there is one idea that has informed my thinking in recent years, it is one inspired by the great Brazilian educationalist Paulo Freire who worked with illiterate farm and plantation workers in Brazil and Chile in the 1960s and 1970s.¹ It is that the highest goal

1 P. Freire, *Pedagogy of Hope* (London: Continuum, 1992).

of education is to teach people to ‘read and write the word’ so they can come to ‘re-read and re-write the world.’

We spend a great deal of effort, in the developed world at least, on the former but we tend to overlook the latter. Yet if we teach young people that this is the way the world is and leave it there, we are supporting the status quo and making of them passive observers. The ‘object’ not the ‘subject’ of their world, as Freire would have it. To teach them, as part of the day-to-day process of educating them in a broad curriculum, that this is the way the world is currently and why that is the case, and to maintain a constant eye on helping them know that it doesn’t always have to be that way, that such a state is transitory and they can work to bring to bear an influence that will make it different if they choose to – now that’s what I call an education.

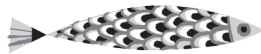
Through simple dialogue based on a position of humility, not of academic arrogance, Freire could help superstitious peasant workers move from a fatalistic stance of: ‘You’re better than I am because you’re educated and I’m not and that’s God’s way’ to: ‘No, God isn’t the cause of all this. It’s the boss!’² He was imprisoned as a traitor and then exiled from Brazil after the military coup in 1964. Of course he was.

In recent years, after the death of my first wife and finding new happiness and perspectives with the lady to whom this book is dedicated, my thinking has been further fuelled by time spent in living in the Middle East, in Latin America and now in the Far East. Despite the fact that J. S. Bach never left Germany

and Immanuel Kant barely even made it out of Königsberg, they say that travel broadens the mind. Yet it's not the travel that does it. It's what you do with the travel. It's about how you use it to inform, affect and influence your thinking, if you'll let it.

So, as a result of my travels and experiences and my new life, I think about education and I think increasingly about injustice and I think about opportunity and the planet and I think about love and loss and life, and I think that just about covers most of what is important.

To sum up, then, this isn't so much a book about what I think but what you think. I hope you enjoy my thinking but please refrain from using it as a substitute for your own. Then it will all have been worthwhile.



42 Uses for This Book

1. To help you think.
2. To help you teach.
3. To help you think about teaching.
4. To help you teach about thinking.
5. As a graduation prize.
6. As a retirement prize.
7. As a raffle prize.
8. As a booby prize.
9. As a birthday present.
10. As a Christmas present.
11. In the staffroom.
12. In the waiting room.
13. In the living room.
14. In the little boy's room.
15. In the bath.
16. In the pub.
17. In bed.
18. In one go.
19. On the go.
20. On the train.
21. On the loo.
22. On a whim.
23. All the way through.
24. Dipping in and out.
25. Cover to cover.
26. Front to back.
27. Back to front.
28. Back to back.
29. To yourself.
30. To someone else.
31. To pass the time.
32. To make things happen.
33. To make things stop.
34. To stop a draught.

35. To stop the rot.

36. To stop a riot.

37. To start a riot.

38. To start a revolution.

39. To start a discussion.

40. To start a lesson.

41. To end a lesson.

42. As a lesson to us all.



Thunks¹

Is being strong the same as refusing to be weak?

Does a newborn baby achieve anything?

Is a mum who is abusive towards you better than no mum?

Does a dog know if you've hurt it by accident?

Is an inside-out hat the same hat?

Is never longer than forever?

1 Thunk: *n.* 1. a beguiling question about everyday things that stops you in your tracks and helps you start to look at the world in a whole new light.

Real-Time History

In April 2013, the Boston Marathon was hit by a double bomb attack carried out by two Chechen brothers. Three days later, after killing a police officer in Massachusetts, they were tracked down by police and a shoot-out ensued in which one of the brothers was killed. Several hours later, after an intensive search, the surviving brother was found, seriously wounded and hiding in a boat in a residential district. Between the Monday of the marathon atrocity and the Thursday of the killing and capture of the brothers, there was also a fire and an explosion at a fertiliser processing plant in Texas which left 15 people dead, many injured and destroyed property in the vicinity.

8

There are two striking facts about how I know about these dramatic and tragic events.

The first is that I didn't read about it in the news. I don't read newspapers (if I want an opinion I'll come up with one and so I don't need to be fed one). I didn't watch them on some 24-hour rolling news channel. I don't have a TV. I didn't even read about it on a news website, although I could have done, eventually. I learned about the events the way I receive most of my news these days – through Twitter. And not tweets from the BBC or NBC or any formal news channel. Most of the above was through tweets and retweets put out by @YourAnonNews, the 'news' aggregation 'service' of the 'protest' 'group'

Anonymous¹ – the ones with the Guy Fawkes masks inspired by the film *V for Vendetta*.

The second is that I didn't so much read or hear about the terrible events in the US that week as actually witness them. When the fugitive brothers shot the policeman at Massachusetts Institute of Technology, I was one of the first to know, within minutes of it happening. When the entire city of Boston was on lockdown as heavily armed police officers and SWAT teams combed the streets, I was learning about it as it took place and 'watching' the drama as I 'peered out' from behind someone's net curtains. As it was happening. When the first gunfight took place, I watched through a narrow gap and heard the shots ringing out and the shouts of the police officers in the darkness. I watched the flames from the burning fertiliser plant near Waco from the front of an SUV, saw the massive explosion that followed and heard the screams of the child behind me as he cried to his dad, 'I can't hear! I can't hear! Get out of here! Please get out of here!' All within minutes of it happening.

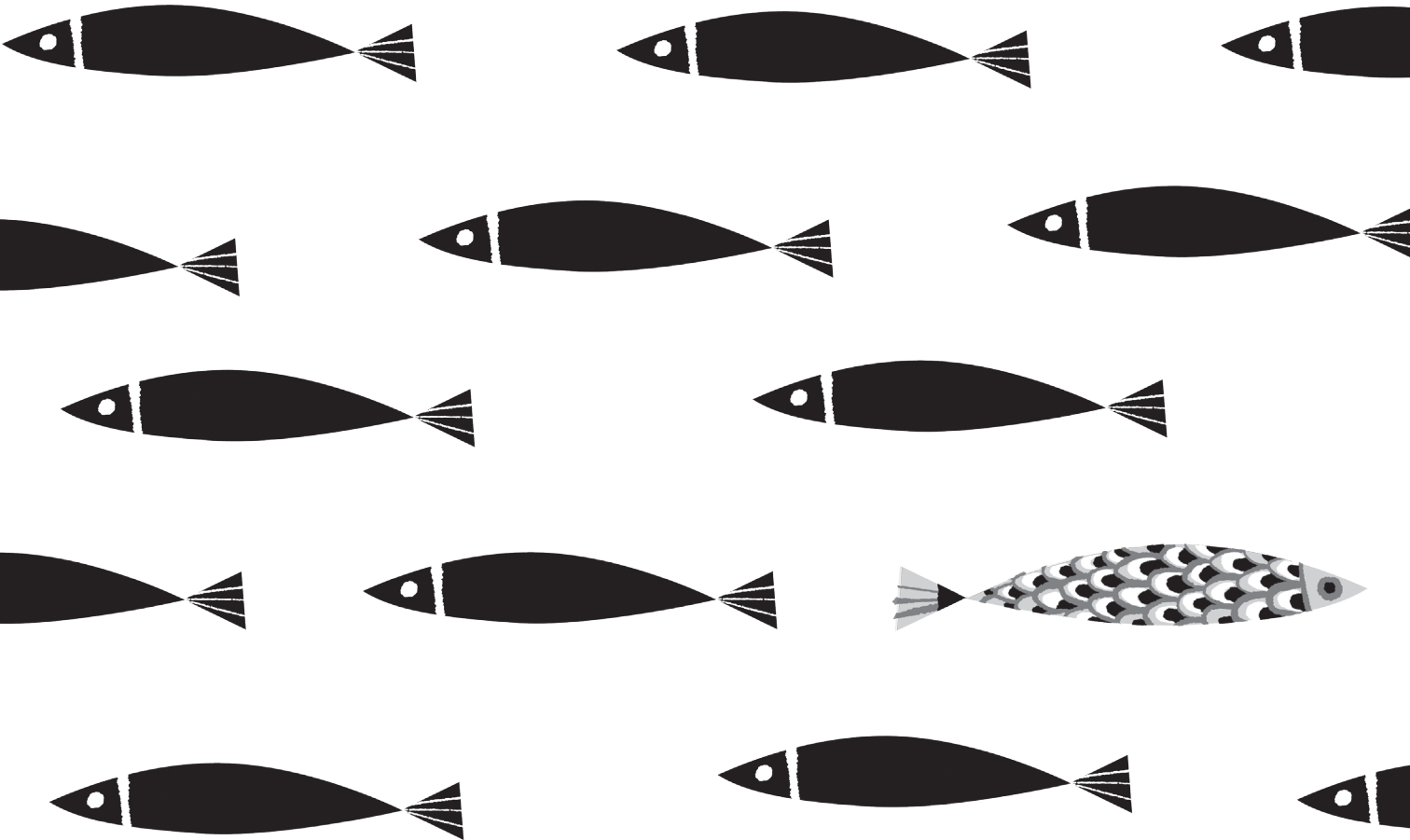
I wasn't reading about these events in the news, I was experiencing history in real time.

1 Note how many quote marks I need to try to define, in old terms, a modern phenomenon that distributes news but is not a news service, that does protest but is not just about protests, and is a group in that there is more than one person behind it but it is not an organisation in the way that you or I would previously understand it.

There is a sense in which school-based history lessons are, at best, a process of understanding and interpreting historic events and their protagonists or, at worst, the memorisation and regurgitation of 'one f***** thing after another'. All well and good, but what about tomorrow's history? To what extent are you using the opportunities afforded through the instantaneous transmission of events by ordinary people experiencing those events to help your learners witness them for themselves and while the events are happening? To what extent are you mediating between your learners and the world as it unfolds, helping them grasp it, understand it, anticipate it, be affected by it, learn from it, act upon it even, and all in real time?



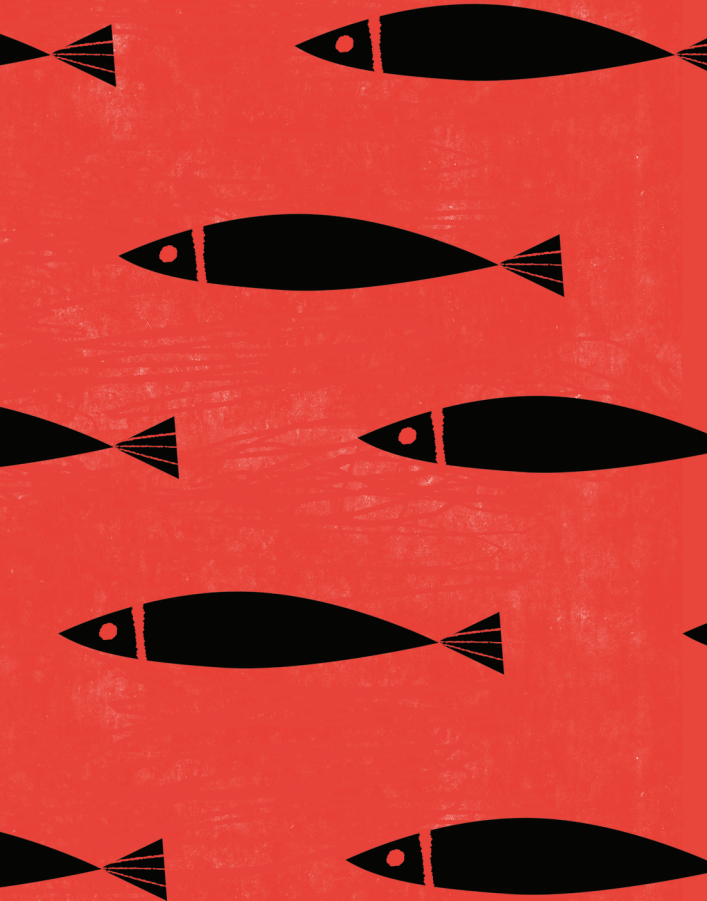
One person can change the world, they just can't do it alone.



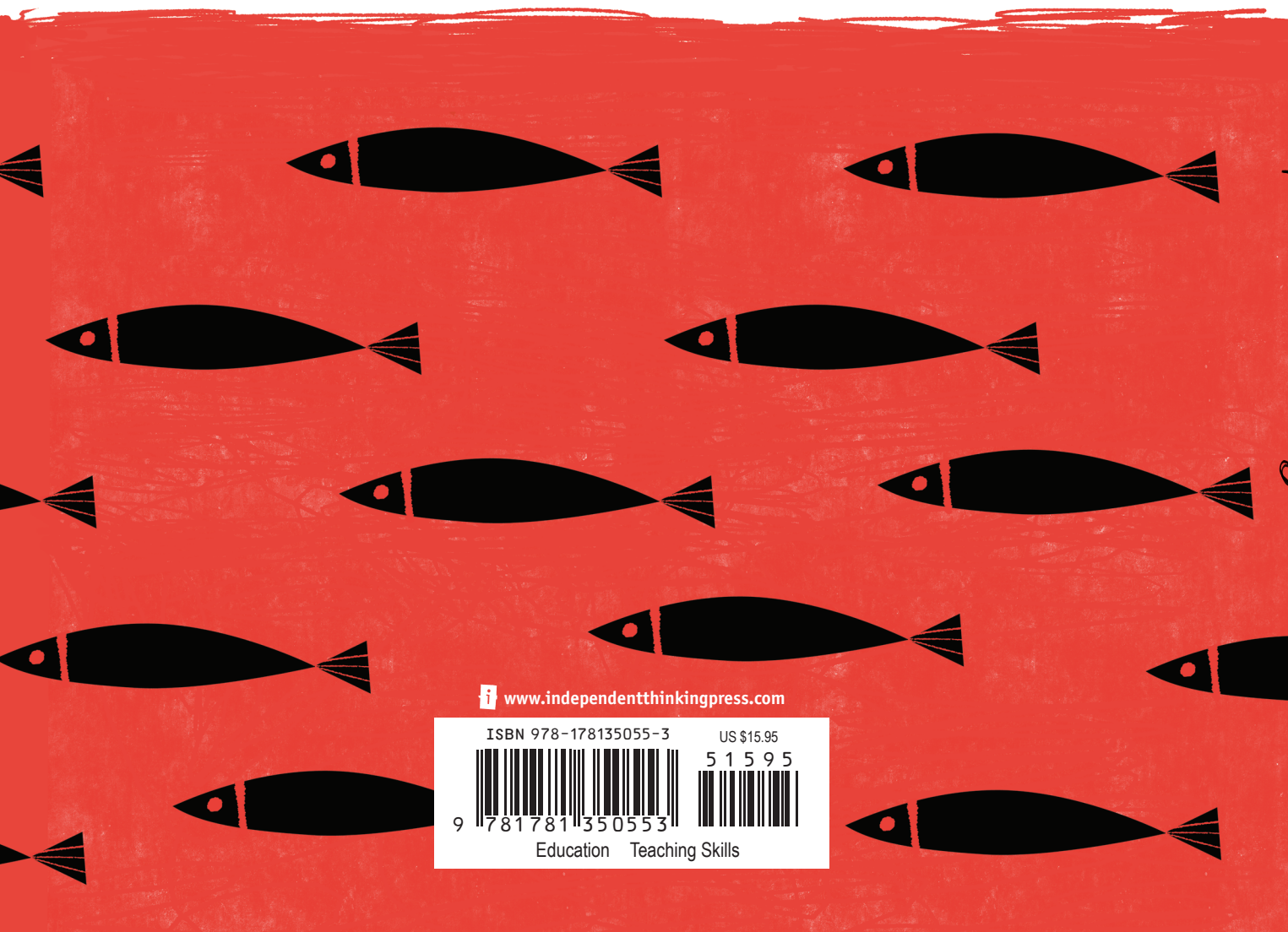


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