

Gillian Bridge

The  
Significance  
Delusion

Unlocking Our Thinking for  
Our Children's Future



Crown House Publishing Limited  
[www.crownhouse.co.uk](http://www.crownhouse.co.uk)

First published by

Crown House Publishing Ltd  
Crown Buildings, Bancyfelin, Carmarthen, Wales, SA33 5ND, UK  
www.crownhouse.co.uk

and

Crown House Publishing Company LLC  
PO Box 2223, Williston, VT 05495  
www.crownhousepublishing.com

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First published 2016.

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Page 87, extract from Quinlan, Donald M. and Brown, Thomas E. (2003) Assessment of short-term verbal memory impairments in adolescents and adults with ADHD, *Journal of Attention Disorders* 6(4): 143–152 has been reproduced with permission.

Page 125, extract from Immordino-Yang, Mary H., McColla, Andrea, Damasio, Hanna and Damasio, Antonio (2009) Neural correlates of admiration and compassion, *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences* 106(19): 8021–8026. Available at: <http://www.pnas.org/content/106/19/8021.full>. has been reproduced with permission.

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British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data  
A catalogue entry for this book is available  
from the British Library.

Print ISBN 978-1-78583-108-9  
Mobi ISBN 978-1-78583-131-7  
ePub ISBN 978-1-78583-132-4  
ePDF ISBN 978-1-78583-133-1

LCCN 2016910207

Printed and bound in the UK by  
Bell & Bain Ltd, Thornliebank, Glasgow



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# Introduction

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When we remember we are all mad, the mysteries disappear and life stands explained.

**Mark Twain**

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*The Significance Delusion* is a synthesis of research, ideas, facts and fascinating real-life anecdotes exploring our human obsession with meaning: ‘What does it all mean for me? What do I mean to others?’

Although my early trajectory destined me for a career studying and teaching arts subjects, life, as is its way, pushed me in rather a different direction. But it could only have done that if I were complicit in some way. Although I had nothing more than personal experience, curiosity and naive scepticism to go on, I found myself unhappy with conventional explanations of the strange human behaviour and life happenings that I came across. For many, including the ‘experts’, odd things – loving people suddenly turning violent; good parents rearing troubled kids; clever, busy, talented people becoming addicts – could be explained away by stories about repressed desires, inherent badness, ‘King Babies’ and the like. I wasn’t buying into any of that. I wanted to hear about deeper causes and probe into the fundamentals of behaviour. Finding few resources available, I did my own research into the scientific underpinnings of these problems. I had to learn how brains do what they do and how this manifests in observable behaviour.

Then I started working with clients and added genuine experience to the pot of knowledge I had acquired. And now I mostly work with people who are not average, whose brains seem to function in a different way from most others. All of which is enormously helpful for defining how more regular brains work. This, as I have discovered, is not actually normal at all, at least in species terms.

What I have found is that humans are essentially delusional. And that in order to thrive, they need to share a common delusion. This finding, the underlying explanations of how it all came to be and

where it has taken us, is what this book is about. The key features are:

- Research into two key mutations which allowed our brains to develop long-distance connectivity and thus symbolic thinking, but also vulnerability to mental health problems.
- The search for Significance.
- The science behind the ‘mutant human’.
- Optimum child care.
- The central place of language (and individual language use) in wellbeing.
- Survival skills for human growth.
- The current obsession with individualism that is compromising our ability to thrive.

There are three interweaving strands throughout the book: brain matters, child-rearing matters and self-versus-community matters. The overall ambition of the book is one I have chosen, in places, to call ‘surthrival’ – a portmanteau term that suggests not just surviving but thriving in the best possible interests of the individual *and* of the species.

Our brains are us, but it seems we are not quite all we might like to be. Despite having advantages previous generations could only dream about, we are still not as happy or fulfilled as we think we should be. By understanding brain function, by seeing how it ‘makes’ us behave in the way we do, by looking at the implications of the nature/nurture debate and by considering how society works on both an individual and a group level, we can get a better grip on it all and improve our own lives, plus those of generations to come.

We are the blueprint for that future, so it is vital to question, in particular, the ramifications of some aspects of contemporary ideologies on the mental health of both present and future generations. I challenge givens such as: the importance of happiness and self-esteem; the value of subjective experience and individual ‘rights’ over social cohesion. And I certainly hope my take will prove controversial.

I also hope it will prove compelling because there is a hunger for understanding. My audiences and clients frequently express the need to understand themselves, and they want to understand why so much seems to be going wrong with us humans, despite having more of just about everything we ever thought we wanted. The old explanations don’t work; the ‘truths’ coming from experts are

problematic because they have not had the direct experience. The worlds of research and of professional caretaking of society have been secret, special and siloed for too long. I believe most people, given the appropriate information, would prefer to think of themselves as responsible enough to make their own judgements.

Who am I? What am I? How am I? You will find the answers here. By the end of the book, with the help of my occasionally challenging, often quirky and usually humorous observations, you should be a whole lot closer to understanding yourself – which is good. And if you have or care for children, either personally or professionally, you will also be a lot closer to knowing how to promote their future wellbeing in the best way possible – which is better still.

This book takes you on a journey through time, history and the mysterious labyrinth that is the brain, visiting a number of strange cases and everyday conflicts on the way. Some are eternal dilemmas such as, how do we feel we're individual but remain part of society? Others are utterly modern – for example, what can we do about clever kids addicted to online living? How do we make them less sensitive and susceptible to the knock-backs of failure? By the end, having read this compendium of all the lifestyle advice that a well-adjusted human will ever need, you will know what it takes to thrive and survive as the bizarre creature with danger written into its DNA – the human being.



## Chapter 1

# Is Life Enough?

Do you leap blithely out of bed and celebrate the dawning of the new day? Do you turn on the news and find yourself humming ‘What a Wonderful World’? Does satisfaction, like an Andrex puppy, run riot through your workplace?

I ask, because I’d love to meet someone who felt able to say ‘yes’ to all of those questions. That would be something of a first for me, and as a cynical old thing I could do with the morale boost. I sometimes feel that if I were an alien anthropologist, just landed here to take soundings on the earth’s viability as a place to colonise, I’d be advising my leader to think twice before committing to the project:

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Well, yes, it’s got all we need to support life, for survival ...

AI, I can hear a ‘but’ coming. What’s your problem?

Well ... but, the humans seem to be in a bit of a mess. Plenty of them and all that, but somehow not quite, how can I put it? Thriving. Even in the places where there’s enough of everything to go around, like food, shelter, clothing, education; it just seems that it’s never enough.

AI, tell me more. Give me some facts, some evidence.

Okay, take these news reports I’ve been reading:

- Desire for happiness that only leads to woe
- Unborn child feels a mother’s stress
- Face up to it: children are in the grip of National Attention Deficit Disorder
- Top head slams hothousing
- British parents are too intrusive and ‘baby’ their children, says MP
- Babies of obese mothers at risk of heart disease
- Britain’s health has fallen further behind other Western nations, says *Lancet* report
- Loneliness in old age ‘deadlier than obesity’
- Guilt of the balancing act mothers
- Buggy children are unable to walk at three

- Children 'are growing more miserable'
- Too soft pupils will get toughened up
- Student mental ill health is 'under treated'
- One in ten young 'can't cope with life'

I don't know about you, Leader, but that last one just about scares the coprolite out of me. Ten per cent of the species likely to fail to function? Why risk it?

Al, you've got a point. Let's fire up the rockets.

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It's all getting quite depressing. If we take that last report (which was produced by the Prince's Trust in 2015) a bit more seriously, we can see that we're on target for it to get even more depressing, because, based on the UK government's population projections, by 2020 we will have 1.3 million non-copeing unhappy youngsters in our midst.

This is not only about how we parent our young and how badly wrong we seem to be getting it. Heaven knows, parents get it in the neck quite enough already. This is about how we *all* live our lives; it's about things that run through the warp and the weft of every single human life lived.

It's a species thing. It's about why there really is something funny about our species, something that, if we weren't quite so successful at surviving, should surely make us non-viable.

This book is about that strange anomaly and explains how that anomaly lies behind so many of our modern problems. It leads, almost inevitably, to consider our contemporary tsunami of discontent – which includes:

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#### STRESS

respect ADDICTION yearning religiosity

OVER-CONSUMPTION

INTERNET FIXATION fear of death obsessions

sentimentality ANXIETY

hypochondria Munchausen syndrome emptiness

despair DEPRESSION

emotional confusion authority issues AUTISM

identity issues texting obsession

POSSESSION ENVY perfectionism over achievement guilt

EATING/WEIGHT ISSUES power/megalomania

NOVELTY/THRILL SEEKING

restlessness RELATIONSHIP ISSUES commitment

issues SEX ISSUES

status envy loss of motivation shame envy  
 CO-DEPENDENCY control issues  
 genealogy 'special and different' therapy/counselling  
 fixation emotional desperation UNDEPENDABILITY  
 ceremony and ritual fixation BOREDOM SELF-DOUBT  
 procrastination COMMUNICATION DIFFICULTIES  
 demotivation  
 FAME SEEKING Facebook and 'phoney' friendships  
 THOUGHTLESSNESS

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These are some of the most common and troubling concerns that people suffer from today, even though not one of them can be said to have any measurable or quantifiable existence in what we call reality. These concerns and troubles have their primary and most powerful and disturbing existence deep within our own heads.

## What's in it for you?

Well, first, you'll find out a lot about what it means to be human in this book, including the implications of some of the most recent and ground-breaking research into those very heads where so many of our troubles are located. And then you will find explanations for those problems that you might be experiencing, together with a whole raft of solutions for them. At the same time, you will have to hand a masterwork on resilience that will fit you with the skills to help bring up a whole generation of more fully rounded and functional human beings. What's not to find helpful and fascinating?

Am I, in fact, an alien anthropologist? Not quite. But I'm enough of an outsider to have a useful perspective, and enough of an insider to know what I'm dealing with. Having spent years working with some of the most extreme forms of human behaviour, I have a very useful back catalogue of materials to draw on.

I have worked with geniuses who have been well-regarded and in highly paid work, with geniuses who have ended up in prison and with yet others who have lived in a permanent state of confusion. I have worked with brain-damaged people who have had little apparent physical or cognitive function left and come to me barely able to communicate at all, and those who have only grunted or barked. I have worked with crack addicts who have carried on slicing open already stapled together arms and with prisoners whose scarred heads showed horrific evidence of having been cracked open by

‘colleague’s’ spades. I have treated people so desperate for booze that they’ve sucked the final drops of spilt alcohol from the carpet and gym bunnies so desperate for fitness they’ve pounded the treadmill till they dropped.

I have watched as sink-estate mums blossomed into Shakespeare-mad lecturers and seen apparently charming young men suddenly turn and throw knives at innocent kids. I have worked with stratospherically successful CEOs and with people who haven’t had a clue how to get themselves out of bed in the mornings.

And here’s the thing: without exception, I have observed that those who were the most damaged (and they were by no means always the least successful) had something very specific in common. They shared a particular trait.

## The magic Cinderella key

This trait, the one that helps to pinpoint and identify dysfunctional thinking and/or behaviour, also pointed me in the direction of a factor underpinning all three: the trait, the thinking and the behaviour. This, I realised, had potentially revolutionary implications. So I decided to call this underlying factor my magic Cinderella key because its impact on humans is both mysterious and transformative, and it seems to have been more or less completely overlooked by everyone. Also it unlocks the cells (a rather useful pun here) in our imprisoning brains.

I shall keep you hanging on a bit longer, though, before I tell you what it is. If I said what it was straightaway you might simply see it as a rather familiar figure dressed in rags, and your response to it might go something like this, ‘What, that old thing! Why do you want to make such a fuss about *that*?’ So let me introduce you to Cinders when I’ve dressed her up a bit more formally in the material of science.

What I can tell you now is that this magic Cinderella factor is bigger than poverty, social breakdown, loss of religion, the internet, commercialism and all of the other suspected causes of unhappiness and failure to thrive. And in its way, it’s much more dangerous.

## Danger in our DNA?

It is dangerous because it is deeply implicated in the way that we developed as humans. Although it may have been no more than an accidental occurrence, a mutation even, it came to define the way we thought about experience and reacted to it, and so, in a very real sense, it made our species the special one that it is. But, but, but ... the downside of this evolutionary quirk (or hiccup, or whatever) is that it also made us much more vulnerable than other animals to the possibility that quite large numbers of us could fail to develop into fully functioning, thriving members of the species.

To understand why this is, in the next chapter I shall be looking at the way our brains evolved. But that is only one of the reasons; the others are:

- Sometimes the stuff that's inside our head is our own worst enemy. Know your enemy is a very good principle.
- Understanding how brains work (at a reasonably user-friendly level) will help to improve anyone's parenting skills.
- Our brains are us and this is both our history and our inheritance.



## Chapter 2

# Bounded in a Nutshell

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Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell, and count myself  
a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams.

*Hamlet, II. ii*

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## The girl in the canvas sack

There were screams coming down the corridor, followed by anguished cries, ‘I’m living inside my head. I can’t get out. I can’t get out. Help me. Help me.’

The dark-haired young girl who was doing all the screaming and shouting was dragged around a corner and into view, straitjacketed in a makeshift green canvas stretcher which two grim-faced men were failing to hold quite taut enough to keep her above ground level as they hurried her past me on their way to the treatment area.

In the days before gap years, many young people spent the time between A levels and university earning a bit of extra cash doing any available kind of menial work. If you lived in the ‘lunatic fringe’ around Surrey, you ended up working in one of the many vast Gothic mental asylums. The one I worked in was called Belmont, and has long since disappeared in the dubious pursuit of care in the community. My job in that Hammer Horror of a place was cleaning the ECT (electro-convulsive therapy) wards, where the intractable cases were sent, and on those wards I learned more about human heads than a shelf full of books could have taught me.

I stated that the magic Cinderella key was deeply implicated in the way we have developed as a species and suggested that to understand it, and see how it affects what we call our psychological wellbeing, there would first have to be some dressing up of a simple-looking idea in some fancy scientific clothing. This is where I ask you to follow some quite complex connections between developments which are in themselves all about complex connections. It will

be worth it (I promise), and you will advance your thinking skills at the same time, because, as we shall see, advanced thinking skills are what you get when you can make complex connections. It's a win-win exercise.

## The fancy scientific clothing

One of the most curious things about our heads is this business of being aware that we exist inside them. If I were to ask you to say where you think the centre of your self is, nine times out of ten you would point to an area just behind or slightly above the bridge of your nose. It is this sense of being located in a physical place, and that this place is inside our heads rather than, say, in our feet (not as daft as it sounds – they move us around) that is both the making of us and the undoing of us. It's that anomaly that I mentioned earlier: the aspect of human development that makes us so special is also the one that places us at risk. This is what that poor girl found out when she was being dragged, imprisoned inside her head, to the ECT machine that may, hopefully, have helped free her for a while.

Of course, not everybody has experiences as extreme as hers, but the more common issues such as stress, respect, addiction and all the rest of my list are every bit as much the negative consequences of having an internalised self.

So 'we' are there, located inside our head casings, for good or bad (for good *and* bad). And it is in those head casings that we have both our sense of self and most of our conscious experiences. I don't intend to spend much time on the idea of what consciousness is (there are entire research organisations dedicated to that) but, briefly, and to use a modern analogy, consciousness is a bit like a series of text alerts that keeps us up to speed on what's happening (internally and externally), focusing attention on any need to prioritise and prompting initiation of any action required by that data.

A sense of self is altogether different. Put very simply, it is the perception that all of the above is happening to an embodied being that is unique and distinct from the external world which surrounds it. This is something that, perhaps surprisingly, we share with flatfish. In fact, it could be argued that flatfish are rather more self-aware than dogs (making a nonsense of the hierarchies of sophistication usually applied to different species). Because flatfish can camouflage themselves very effectively, this implies some primitive sense that they 'know' there is a self which, under threat, needs

**Our brains are us. But we are neither happy and fulfilled,  
nor all that we 'should' (or maybe could) be.**

**We have everything previous generations could only have dreamed of,  
but it seems it's never quite enough. What's going on?**

Does it have anything to do with the way our brains have developed, by any chance? Gillian Bridge takes us on a journey through time, history and the mysterious labyrinth that is the brain, investigating strange happenings and unlikely people along the way.

*The Significance Delusion* is a challenging explanation of our species' peculiar vulnerability to disorders of both thinking and social cohesion. It is a power pack of research, ideas, facts and fascinating real-life stories which explores the human obsession with meaning and significance. What does it all mean for me? What do I mean to you?

*The Significance Delusion* is humorous as well as deeply serious, and is the must-read compilation of lifestyle advice for tomorrow's well-adjusted people. It is a book about what it takes to survive and thrive as an individual human and as a society. From it you will learn the meaning of life, and your place in the world.

**For thinkers, parents, educators, psychologists, psychotherapists and policy makers.**

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In her compelling, accessible account of humanity's self-destructive significance meme, Gillian Bridge takes us on a genre-defying voyage ... Weaving together cultural, scientific, and behavioural realities, *The Significance Delusion* presents revolutionary implications for human development.

**Lotje Sodderland, filmmaker and director, *My Beautiful Broken Brain***

Gillian Bridge weaves clinical and popular cultural references to illustrate the narratives that we tell ourselves and each other, but ultimately questions the adverse consequences of introspective psychotherapy practice.

**Jeremy Christey, Counselling Psychologist, counsellor and CBT therapist**

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**Gillian Bridge** is a lecturer, researcher, therapist and brain expert. Northern born, Southern bred: cross-referencing of influences and ideas comes naturally to her. Language is her medium, neuroscience her fascination, and she longs to understand what makes us humans human. She is a member of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. From left-handed relatives to prisoner clients, no one escapes her fascinated delight in difference.



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ISBN: 978-178583108-9



9 781785 831089

Psychology The self, ego, identity, personality